

THE HEIRESS OF THE FOREST

by ELEANOR C. PRICE *



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Auntie & Brenton
with love from
Aunt Alice

Aug 19th 1901

wishing you every
happy returns.

The Heiress
of the Forest

The Heiress of the Forest
A Romance of Old Anjou
BY ELEANOR C. PRICE *Author of 'In
the Lion's Mouth' 'Brown Robin' &c.*

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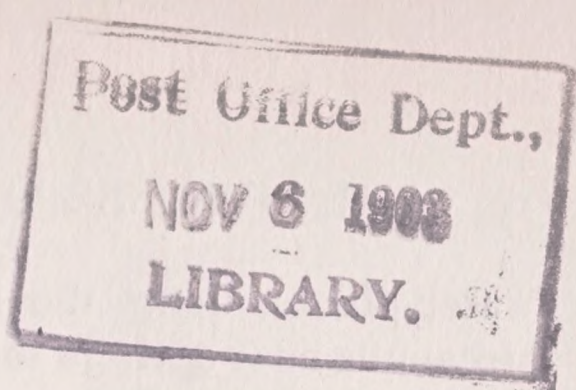
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The Heiress of the Forest

CHAPTER I

FOUR GIANTS AND A DWARF

TWO hundred years ago there was a forest in Anjou, very old and very vast, known as the Forest of Montaigle. In the thick depths of its underwood, where not even the woodmen often ventured, wolf and wild boar had their home: among the ferns and bracken the red deer couched, and quantities of game of all kinds lived undisturbed, except by the great hunts in winter. There were many large trees in the forest, oaks and beeches especially growing to an immense size, often grey with moss, sometimes overgrown with ivy; and the golden broom of that Plantagenet country, shooting up tall and slender, leaned long flowery spikes across the darker masses of foliage. In more sandy parts of the forest fir and birch reigned among the trees; heather grew closely over the ground; there were wild natural clearings where nothing was taller than the hollies and yews and thorns, and there were marshy places full of reeds and

water-plants along the borders of some little stream or near springs that rose and spread at their own will in those lonely wilds. The flowers of the forest were many, and in summer its thickets were red with luxuriant wild roses and sweet with honeysuckle which no children came to gather. For the peasants feared the forest : unearthly beings haunted it, and strange legends belonged to it, handed down from one generation to another.

In older days, in the time of the civil wars, and indeed ever since the wars with England, this region had been infested with robbers and freebooters, even more dangerous to the country than wer-wolves or ghostly huntsmen. Advancing civilisation and Cardinal de Richelieu had made travelling more secure all over France ; and the Marquis de Montaigle, the owner of the forest and of great tracts of surrounding land, had cut a road through it wide enough for coaches, had improved the wild green drives that ran through its depths for his own hunting, and built lodges here and there for his keepers and woodmen. The peasants whose labour made the road had no thought of the advance of civilisation, but worked under compulsion and in constant terror ; every accident or misfortune that happened gave fresh food for their superstition, and at night round their miserable hearths they prophesied evil to the Marquis and his family. It seemed that they were justified when his three sons died in their childhood one

after another, and only a little daughter, the youngest, remained to inherit the great estates which made her an object of interest to all the noble and courtly match-makers of Louis XIV.'s time.

For the greater safety of travellers, the brush-wood and the smaller trees had been cleared away for about fifty yards on each side of the new road, and near the north-east boundary of the forest, set back upon the greensward, sheltered by two grey old oaks and by a still older hollow stump covered with ivy, the home of a family of owls, there was a low stone building with a mossy roof, in which Père Guillaume and his three sons lived, if they could be said to live anywhere at all. For their days and nights were generally spent under no roof but the green boughs or the sky. Guillaume was the Marquis's forester, and head over all the keepers and woodmen of the place. His sons worked under him; these four, with their four large and fierce dogs, were the terror of evil-doers about Mont-aigle. As far as they could they represented law and order; they were the protectors of game, the enemies of wild beasts and birds of prey. Various bodies of kites and hawks, of wild cats, weasels and other creatures of mischief were nailed up in rows under the eaves of their house, and sensitive noses did well to avoid its near neighbourhood. As for the four foresters, all smells were alike to them, except for the reason that, like dogs, they learned much by following

their noses. The youngest of the three brothers, a wonderful hunter, could track by scent almost as keenly as his own dog.

One evening in October, in the year 1680, old Guillaume and his three sons were sitting on a log near their own door. It was not often that they were to be seen all together, for their work generally led them miles apart, into the farthest corners of the forest. And they were a remarkable sight when all together; and the Marquis de Montaigle's friends—or rather, perhaps, his enemies—often envied him the service of those four men. Joli-gars, the youngest, the shortest of them, was over six feet high; the nickname by which, like his brothers, he was always known, was owing to a rather handsome girlish face with bright colouring. The father and the second brother, Gars-cogne (the striker) were of the same height, three inches taller than Joli-gars. Ga'cogne, as they called him, was an ugly, ill-tempered creature of enormous strength; the other forest people had a wholesome dread of quarrelling with him, for he had already killed more than one poacher with his own hands and without even a stick. People whispered that if Ga'cogne had been merely a poor peasant, he would have been hanged at the cross-roads before now, and there were some who would not have been sorry. But the Marquis de Montaigle had the right of high and low justice in those parts, and he was not at all likely to hang such a useful servant to please the peasants. Besides,

there was a connection between these wild foresters and the family of Montaigle. Five-and-thirty years ago, the Marquise, who was a Grandseigne, had been nursed as a weakly baby by old Guillaume's wife, the mother of these men. Her own first child was then only a few months old; she had carried away the noble little girl to her cottage—her husband, then a young man, being a gamekeeper on the Grandseigne estates—and had brought her up with her own children till she was five years old. When still very young, Mademoiselle de Grandseigne had been married to the Marquis de Montaigle, many years older than herself; and the first favour she asked of him was that her nurse and foster-mother, with her husband and sons, might be taken into his service. So they first lived in the village of Montaigle, close under the walls of the château; but after a few months Mère Guillaume died. Then the husband and sons moved away to that long-roofed hovel in the forest where they had lived ever since, and in serving the Marquis never forgot that they specially belonged to the Marquise. They were not very popular with the old Montaigle dependents, the régisseur, the major-domo, who were always glad to find an occasion against them, though kept in wholesome fear by their position, their strength and well-known honesty.

As these four sat on the log that evening, rather silent, the autumn day closing sadly in, the autumn wind whistling in the leaves above

their heads, they were waiting for news that seemed long in coming. And suddenly one of them rose to his feet, the eldest, rightly called Grand-Gui, for he was at least two inches taller than his father and his next brother. He was thin, however, and stooped a little, and his long brown face, grave at the best of times, looked deeply dismal now.

"I must go," he said. "The little fellow promised me, and yet it seems he is never coming. I must go and find out for myself. I can wait no longer."

"Sit down!" growled his father in a terrible voice. "Do you hear me, fool? Sit down with us and wait."

"Wait while Madame may be dying!" cried Grand-Gui.

He moved a few steps forward, and strained his eyes to look along the road.

"And you—can you bring her back to life, pray?" asked old Guillaume, wagging his grey beard, while Joli-gars laughed, and Ga'cogne stared sulkily at the ground.

"I want my soup," he muttered in the silence that followed.

"Then go and eat it out of the pig-trough, for none but a pig would think of soup to-night," retorted his father.

Grand-Gui, with a deep sigh, came back and sat down beside his youngest brother.

"Why did you laugh?" he said to him.

"How should I know?" And the young

fellow showed his teeth, white and sharp as those of a young wild animal. "I thought it was a pity you were not the doctor from La Flèche. You look as wise as he does, and twice as solemn."

"If I were a doctor, nobody should ever die," murmured Grand-Gui.

"Then the world would be much too full of people. You might let the bad ones die, and keep the good alive. I can give you a list of both. Shall we begin now? The good first—Madame la Marquise, l'Oiselet, Monsieur Nico——"

"Silence, chattering fools!" said their father.

They were silent; but the forest raised its voice, for the wind began to blow in stronger gusts, and the great boughs creaked, the dead and dying leaves flew in showers, while the bracken rustled in the undergrowth. All the sadness and mystery of autumn was abroad that evening; even these wild minds felt it, nearly related to Nature as they were, and too much used to her moods to be easily impressed by them. The moon had risen, and the long rays of light that pierced the foliage and fell across the glades, moving and trembling and waving with the shadows, had something of the effect of a thousand phantoms, dark and bright, crossing each other in an uncertain, hurrying crowd. Birds disturbed from their first sleep rustled in the leaves; one of the great dogs that were tied behind the house began to howl; and then with

sudden flapping noise of wings a large owl left its ivy shelter and flew slowly across in the moonlight to a distant tree. From there its melancholy hoot sounded through the forest, and was answered by some friend still farther off, whose voice in a lull of the wind was like a ghostly echo.

Old Guillaume shouted fiercely to the howling dog, and it was silent. His sons looked at each other, and looked at the owl as it flew: only Grand-Gui paid no attention to any of these sights or sounds, but sat with eyes and ears bent to the north-east, to the quarter where the village and the château lay, and from which he expected the news to come.

He had not very long to wait. In the stillness that followed one of those long gusts of wind there came a sound of singing that rapidly grew nearer. The voice was wild, high-pitched and musical, yet with a slight crack in it; the voice of a boy about to grow into a man. A little nearer yet, and the words of the song were plain, as well as quick irregular footsteps crunching the dry leaves along the roadside.

Écoute, belle !
Réveille-toi !
Mon cœur t'appelle :
Viens dans les bois !

Then the wind began to howl again, just as a small figure came hurrying out of the shadows into the mingled twilight and moonlight of Guillaume's clearing.

All the men rose up at once to receive him.

"You sing, you sing!" cried Grand-Gui eagerly, dashing forward. "Then Madame is not dead."

"No, Madame is not dead," the dwarf answered. "But I sing to keep myself alive, let me tell you. Did you hear my voice shake? Ah! Every moment I expected the father of all the wolves to spring out upon me. What a night of horrors, Père Guillaume! There is something unearthly in the forest to-night. Come, let me sit in the middle of you all. There! Four giants ought to be enough to guard one dwarf."

This little fellow, as Grand-Gui affectionately called him, was indeed a curious contrast to the four foresters. He was not much more than three feet high, and slightly twisted on one side, so that he walked lame. His arms were long for his height, and his movements were active, but all his strength seemed to be in the high spirit and the brave soul that shone in his thin face and laughed in his expressive eyes. His hair was curled, and he was gaily dressed in blue velvet, and wore a little dagger with an ornamental hilt. A long feather drooped from his small velvet cap. He might have been sixteen, but it was difficult to tell his age, which he did not himself know. Neither was his real name known. At Montaigle they called him l'Oiselet, because he had always been the pet singing bird of the château.

Old Guillaume took him with one great hand

and set him down on the log. He then sat down beside him, while Gars-cogne crouched on the other side. Grand-Gui and Joli-gars stood in front, the younger brother smiling as usual, the elder all solemn and abstracted eagerness.

"Now for your news, my son," said Guillaume, with a gentleness never experienced by his own sturdy brood.

"Ah! you thought it was good news, because I sang that little song of mine. But I should sing that if my heart was breaking, and Madame herself would say it was better to sing than to weep. I made that, words and tune, the very last day that she was sitting at her frame, and Mademoiselle on a stool beside her. She said, 'My little bird, your droll words are enough to make an old woman young. Who is the fortunate person that you invite into the woods so prettily?' I said, 'Madame, there is only one object of my devotion, and it is not far hence, as Madame la Marquise may have guessed by this time.' Of course she knew, for I ventured to look at my little lady, and she laughed and said that I ought to have lived in the days of the troubadours, instead of in these modern times when romance is dead or dying. I told her that in some hearts its spirit lived yet. She smiled—that smile which tears one's heart—and she said, 'It may have a lonely nest here and there, my poor bird, but the world in which we really live knows nothing of it!' Ah, well! she will find it among the saints in Paradise."

Old Guillaume frowned and pulled his beard. Bewilderment was written on the faces of his sons. Only Grand-Gui stared intently and nodded his head, for he alone, perhaps, understood something of what the dwarf had been telling them.

"What foolish stuff are you talking, boy?" growled the old man. "If you mean that Madame is in Paradise, say it out plainly. But if that town doctor with his poisons has sent her there, by all that's holy I and my sons will meet him on the road home and break every bone in his body."

Two of them growled approvingly, but Grand-Gui murmured, "No, no, it is not so bad as that."

"Not so bad as that," repeated l'Oiselet. "The doctor is still there. Monsieur le Marquis will not let him go, though he says it is too late, and he can do nothing. And the poor doctor is a good man, Père Guillaume. It is not he that will kill Madame with poisons."

The dwarf said this in a slow, marked way, and his eyes travelled from one face to another. If he meant the four to understand anything beyond his mere words, it seemed that he had failed to gain his object. Only something like a growl escaped from the throat of Grand-Gui.

"Are they there still?" he asked.

"Surely they are. They came for the hunting, and for something else that lies still nearer their hearts, and now they wait to see what may

happen to their advantage. I can guess how Madame loves them, and what she thinks of them and their scheme. Oh yes! surely you do not think that the kind relations of Monsieur le Marquis would leave him alone in his sorrow? They will not leave him alone—not yet—but when Madame is gone to live in Paradise, my friends, her little daughter will not live very long at Montaigle. It will be so much safer for her, you know, to be under the care of Madame la Comtesse de Saint-Gervais. And then Monseigneur may be alone as long as he likes.”

“Who told you all this rubbish, you little rag?” asked the old forester. “You pretend to know the affairs of your masters, it seems to me. You want flogging.”

“I only know what I can see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears,” answered the youth, not alarmed by this friendly threat. “I have seen Madame’s face often enough when these plans have been talked of, and heard her words. I belong to Madame. Often I lie on the floor at her feet when no one notices me—if they did, they would not think me worth the trouble of sending away. And, father, if you knew all that I know about the Saint-Gervais brood, it is their bones you would break, and not those of the poor harmless doctor.”

Old Guillaume wagged his head and made a queer face.

“If it would please Madame—” Grand-Gui murmured.

"Silence, fool!" said his father. "You would be hanged on the nearest tree. Baudouin would see to that, and gladly."

Grand-Gui muttered something between his teeth, still keeping his eyes fixed on the face of l'Oiselet.

"Is nothing to be done for Madame, then?" he said aloud.

"My poor Gui, that is precisely what I said to Ma'mselle Agathe half an hour ago. Must we all stand round with our hands in our pockets then, I said, while the good God takes Madame, and other people have it all their own way? In answer she showed me this."

He hastily unbuttoned his little jacket, and took out a folded paper tied with blue ribbon and sealed with blue wax. The outside bore no address, but there were initials faintly traced upon it: "M. M. G. de R. M."

L'Oiselet was the only one of the party who knew his letters, but these, hardly visible in the moonlight, had no meaning for him. He stared curiously at them, however, holding up the paper in his hand.

"What did Ma'mselle Agathe say?" asked Joli-gars, edging a little nearer to him, his girlish cheeks all blushes and dimples.

"She sent no message to you, my boy," replied l'Oiselet, and Gars-cogne burst into rough laughter, which made his brother draw back angrily.

"Come—no more of this fooling," the old

father interposed. "If you have a message, give it. What is the use of that paper?"

"It is Madame's wish that this paper should be carried by a private messenger to the Abbess of Fontevrault. Ma'mselle Agathe drove me out in a great hurry, and told me not to mention this in the château. Then she called me back and said that as the road to Fontevrault ran right through the forest, the messenger could not perhaps start till dawn. But in any case it was Madame's wish that he should go secretly."

"But why not till dawn?" asked old Guillaume, bewildered.

"For fear of the forest, I suppose."

"Go back and tell her that my sons are not waiting-maids."

"Perhaps she thought of danger for Joligars," said the irrepressible l'Oiselet, looking maliciously at the tall young man, who stamped his foot and turned away.

But then in an instant he stepped forward and held out his hand for the paper.

"Give me that. I start this moment," he said in a low voice.

His eldest brother stepped up too, and gave him a push.

"Stand back. No one but I will carry Madame's message."

"No, Gui. I am younger than you, and I have been insulted. Give me the paper."

"You shall not have it. Give it to me, l'Oiselet."

The dwarf kept the paper in his own hand, glancing from one to the other, while Garscogne smiled grimly and said, "Fontevrault is a long way off. You may fight it out between you."

And indeed it seemed that in another moment the two men would be fighting, for Joli-gars tried in vain to shake off his brother's grasp on his arm. The eyes of both were flashing angrily, their faces were flushed, their teeth set; and just then the wind began to howl wildly again, and the dogs behind the house joined with it in chorus.

"Cease your quarrelling, or I strike you both over the head with my staff," cried Père Guillaume in a terrible voice. "Grand-Gui will go. He is discreet, and his legs are long. Joli-gars shall see Master l'Oiselet safe back to the château; he is only fit to be with women and children who cry out about danger. Peace! Not a word! Go into the house, Joli-gars, and see if the soup is ready. We will all eat a mouthful, and go on our ways. You will eat with us, lad."

They all went inside the four walls blackened with smoke, where a long table, two benches, and two beds in the wall were the only furniture. The moon shone in at the open door, and by its light and that of a smouldering fire Joli-gars poured cabbage soup from a black pot into a large wooden bowl on the table, and set on smaller bowls and lumps of dry black bread.

Little Oiselet in his gay suit sat down with the four giants, dipped his own bowl in the soup and shared their supper. His bright eyes danced up and down, watching the four great shadows as they flickered about on the wall.

The supper only lasted a few minutes. Soon after, as the moon rose higher, and the wind blew more wildly, Grand-Gui's long thin shadow ran with him alone through the deep loneliness of the forest. Not even his dog was with him. He carried a stout stick, and a long knife in his belt, but was otherwise unarmed. The Marquise de Montaigle's unaddressed letter lay in a safe place next his heart, as faithful a heart as ever beat under any letter. He would soon cover the distance, a matter of five-and-thirty or forty miles, between Montaigle and Fontevrault.

CHAPTER II

THE ABBEY OF FONTEVRAULT

FONTEVRAULT, called in old chronicles "la perle des abbayes," was at this time ruled by "la reine des abbesses," Madame Gabrielle de Rochecouart de Mortemart. Under her gentle sway, influenced by the orderly and stately spirit which then reigned from Versailles throughout society, the Abbey, always one of the most distinguished in France, had become a centre of fine art, good manners, literary and polite leisure, without losing its more ancient character, dead and revived from time to time, of a house for religious contemplation and charitable work.

Grand-Gui knew nothing of all this, or of the past history, royal and religious, of those old white walls and towers. But he did know that the Abbess of Fontevrault was a very great lady with vast estates and with many priories depending upon her, and he had heard that her peasants loved her, and said it was good to live under her rule. In fact, among the hills and oak-woods south of the Loire, the people's feeling passed into a proverb—"Qu'il fait donc bon vivre sous la crosse !" Evidently it was better to owe service to the Abbess of Fontevrault than

to the Marquis de Montaigle, for instance. Beyond this, Grand-Gui knew that the Abbess was his Madame's cousin, though, considering the short distance that divided them, and that the Abbess was sometimes known to visit her Petit Fontevrault at La Flèche, which was not far from Montaigle, it seemed strange that these ladies should never meet. But it was very possible that the Marquis might have something to do with that.

All this was on the surface of things. But the known character of Madame de Fontevrault emboldened Madame de Montaigle's messenger. He walked and ran through the night without a thought of fear or anxiety, though at ordinary times he was the most anxious, the most prudent, the least adventurous of old Guillaume's sons. He troubled himself little about roads or pathways, but went straight across country after leaving the forest of Montaigle behind, through woods and marshes, over wild heathy hills, a bleak and little cultivated region, till he crossed the Loire by the bridge of Saumur, skirting the town at break of day, and in the early morning came through clustering oak-woods, the outskirts of the great forest tract which lay south of the Loire and the Vienne, and through the large village that had grown up round the Abbey towers, and to the outer gateway, where a lazy porter, the watch-dog of the place, stood yawning and looking out across the white paved square.

Grand-Gui was a man of few words. He quickened his pace on seeing the porter, ran up under the arch of the gateway, and said to him gruffly, "I must see Madame l'Abbesse."

The porter stared. It was a wild figure enough that stood before him, towering over him like a giant at a show, with rough clothes stained and torn by the hurried night journey, and eager eyes shining in the thin brown face. At first he thought it was some escaped madman, then decided that it was one of Madame's savage peasants from a remote district, who had probably killed somebody—a tax-collector, perhaps—and had fled to ask for pardon and sanctuary. In any case, not a character to be admitted within civilised walls, at least without further inquiry.

The porter was wide awake now, and he was a sturdy fellow, though Grand-Gui over-topped him by more than a head and shoulders. He squared himself as he stood in the gateway, and grinned defiantly in the stranger's face.

"You must see Madame? Well, young man, and what for? To show her the tallest rascal in the country? Come, take yourself off. Madame does not care for monsters."

"I must see her, I tell you," repeated Grand-Gui, astonished at this reception.

"You won't see her, I tell you," replied the porter.

"Where is she?"

"At this moment she is in church, and can-

not be disturbed. But don't deceive yourself. Madame does not give audience to all the beggars in the country. It is not her way."

"I am not a beggar," said Grand-Gui quietly, but he grew a little white about the lips, and balanced his stick in his hand.

Why did he not fall upon this man and beat him? Either of his brothers would have done so, but Grand-Gui was a thoughtful person, and considered consequences. He felt sure that a dozen more men would immediately surround him, and that even if he killed three or four of them, he would be overpowered and carried off to prison. And then how would his Madame's errand be accomplished?

"What are you then?" said the porter. "Tell me your business, and if I think fit, when the mass is over, I will send word of it to Madame the Grand Prioress. But to Madame herself—no! She has something better to do than to listen to the complaints of every wandering rascal."

"I will not tell you my business," replied Grand-Gui. "It is for the ears of Madame l'Abbesse alone."

Had he not been told to be secret?

"Then it will never reach them, my friend," said the porter, "for neither you nor your business will pass underneath this archway. Stand back, if you please."

Grand-Gui did stand back for the moment. He stepped from the shadow of the gateway

into the morning sunshine outside, and lingered there, staring through the arch across the great courtyard surrounded with stately buildings that threw clear-cut shadows on the stones. He could see beyond this courtyard into another, entered through a second gateway which seemed to be unguarded. Beyond, there rose the high white walls of the church with its rows of windows. Slated roofs were shining in the sun, gilded vanes flashing. Suddenly a musical noise of silver-sounding bells pealed out from the belfry, and across the bare and sunny space, along through the shadows of a line of arched cloisters, Grand-Gui caught sight of a procession of black and white figures moving in the distance. He was clever enough to guess that the service in the church was over, and that now was his best chance of fulfilling his mission. He stepped forward once more under the archway, where the porter, with one eye on this bold vagrant all the time, stood carelessly whistling.

"Back, my man! or I'll shut the gates in your face."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he lay like a log on the stones, while a long lank figure sprang past him, darting across the court and through the second archway, where two lay sisters who had left their gate open in fancied security while the community was at church, rushed out terrified. But Grand-Gui, seeing nothing but his object, ran swiftly on across the broad sunlit spaces, and finally leaped into the

cloister, into the very midst of the procession of nuns, some of whom fled screaming before him. Others, more courageous, pressed back to guard their Abbess from this strange and unexpected intrusion.

Grand-Gui found himself confronted by a little phalanx of black veils and pale faces, headed by a benevolent-looking elderly nun, who muttered prayers to the saints and was evidently in extreme terror, though she bore the Abbess's crosier high in both hands, and would readily have died in her defence. Grand-Gui did his best to relieve her alarm. He dropped on one knee, snatched off his cap, and looking up into the nun's kind face said in a low voice: "I have a letter for Madame l'Abbesse; I will give it into no hands but her own." Then he did the wisest thing he could have done—he waited—and, after a minute or two the alarm and confusion seemed to cease, the nuns drew back in two lines, the timid but heroic bearer of the crosier stepped to one side, though keeping well in the front, and the Abbess herself, passing through the midst, stood before the kneeling man.

A number of her guards had now hastily assembled at the second gate, and at a sign from her they would have seized the wild picturesque figure and dragged him away to a dungeon. Her servants, in rich liveries, were streaming from every corner towards the cloister steps where he knelt motionless. But Madame

de Fontevrault kept them all at a distance with a wave of her hand, and also dismissed the long procession of nuns. All, with the Mother Prioress, went gliding away down the shadowy cloister, except the one or two whose special offices kept them in attendance on her.

Grand-Gui looked up into one of the most beautiful faces he had ever seen—all the more beautiful to him, that he at once saw a certain likeness to the Marquise de Montaigne. But indeed there were connoisseurs in beauty who admired Gabrielle de Rochechouart even more than her famous and powerful sister, the Marquise de Montespan. She was now thirty-five, and had been ten years Abbess of Fontevrault. When royal favour brought her there, so young and without experience, great discontent was shown by the community. The appointment was regarded as a scandal, which indeed it was; but such scandals were of frequent occurrence in the French Church, though they did not so often justify themselves by their results. It was not long before Madame Gabrielle had won all hearts in her abbey. Her success here was equal to her success at Versailles, where she gained and kept the reverence of a corrupt court and an absolute king.

In the Abbess's smile, as she looked at the wild tall man kneeling before her, there was that enchanting mixture of humour and sweetness which belonged, more or less, to all the Mortemarts.

"Stand up, good man," she said. "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

Grand-Gui did not move from his lowly position till he had extracted the precious letter, which he held out timidly by one corner towards the Abbess's slender fingers.

"Madame," he said, "I come from Montaigle. My name is Guillaume, and I am the foster-brother of Madame la Marquise."

"Indeed!" said the Abbess. "But what—is this letter for me? I see no address—except—Look, Mother de la Mothaye; what do you think of this?"

She held it out to the nun who carried her crosier.

"Pardon, Madame. I have not my spectacles—but those are your initials, Madame, are they not? Still, a very strange and informal and most unbecoming style of addressing a letter. I do not understand what it means. Would it be better not to open the letter, Madame, till this unusual kind of messenger has been examined further? There may be some foul play."

"You are always careful, dear Mother," murmured the Abbess, with a little hesitation. "How did you come by the letter, friend?" she said, turning again to Grand-Gui, who now looked rather formidable, having risen to his full height, from which he gazed down gravely on the company.

"Will Madame permit me?" and a grey-headed man in livery, with a bustling manner,

hurried up to the group. "This man, whoever he is—this messenger—has killed Giraud, or almost killed him. He is dangerous: allow us to take charge of him."

The Abbess did not draw back or show the slightest alarm, but her kind eyes became stern as she looked at the culprit.

"What does this mean? You have been fighting with my servants?"

"Madame, the man at the gate would not let me in. It was necessary that I should knock him down, but he is not dead. I struck him lightly."

"But we are not used to these rough and savage ways," said the steward. "Giraud did his duty. If you had told him your business peaceably——"

"I was not going to tell my business to any one but Madame l'Abbesse herself. My Madame said that it was secret," answered Grand-Gui.

"Madame, shall we take him?" said the steward.

"No, no. He says he is the foster-brother of my cousin, the Marquise de Montaigle. He looks honest. It will be time enough if Giraud dies, and I do not think he will die; he has a thick head. I am not sure, besides, that he has discretion enough for a porter. It is not the first time that I have thought so. Explain yourself more fully, messenger. Did Madame de Montaigle send me this letter by you? And secretly? There is some mystery here that I do not understand."

“Madame, I do not know what the mystery is,” said Grand-Gui humbly. “But last night, as I sat with my father and brothers at the door of our house, l’Oiselet, the dwarf, came from the château and told us that Madame was still alive, but that the doctor from La Flèche could do nothing. There are guests at the château. There is Madame la Comtesse de Saint-Gervais, and there is her son, to whom they talk of marrying our little demoiselle. I have heard that Madame la Marquise is not pleased at the marriage, and truly I think no one is—no one who has seen Monsieur Jean. But what is to be done? There is Madame on her death-bed. I know no more, except that her woman gave that letter to l’Oiselet, and told him it was to be carried secretly to Madame l’Abbesse. I started last night, and here I am, at Madame’s service. I am sorry I struck the porter, but I could not help it.”

“Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!” sighed the Abbess, who had been listening intently to this, perhaps the longest speech Grand-Gui had ever made. “My cousin on her death-bed! What sorrowful news! Has she been long ill? And the letter—ah, now I know, I remember! That I could ever have forgotten, mon Dieu! Poor angel! this touches me indeed.”

As she spoke thus, low and hurriedly, she broke the seal and tore the ribbon from the paper in her hand. It was yellow, and worn at the edges. Within there were a few lines written

by a different hand from that which had traced the initials outside.

"Wherever I am, in any part of the known world, I will fly to my most dear Diane when she sends me this paper. My love and help shall be hers till the last day of my life, and my unworthy prayers for ever. Marie-Madeleine-Gabrielle de Rochechouart de Mortemart."

Tears gathered in Madame de Fontevrault's beautiful eyes and fell on the letter. She had turned away from Grand-Gui to her faithful *chapelaine*, and she hastily put it into her hand, saying: "There, my dear Mother, read that: it is the record of an old friendship. I wrote that and gave it to my cousin Diane when we were young girls together at l'Abbaye-aux-Bois, before they separated us and made that marriage for her. It was a separation indeed, and now it seems her little daughter— In any case, she has sent for me. Leblanc!"

The grey-headed steward came forward and bowed.

"My great coach with outriders in two hours' time. I am going to the Château de Montaigle."

"Pardon! Madame knows the badness of the road, and then there is the forest. To be sure of reaching Montaigle by daylight, she should have started an hour ago."

"What does that matter? I shall arrive," said the Abbess. "And—Leblanc!"

"Madame!"

"This poor man has hurried across country, I

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suspect without rest or food, to summon me to the death-bed of my cousin Madame de Montaigne, *née* de Grandseigne."

"Is it possible!"

"See that he has breakfast immediately, and a comfortable bed to sleep in as long as he pleases. Treat him as your guest, Leblanc."

As the Abbess moved away along the cloister she murmured again to herself, "Mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Poor Diane! Yes, the little daughter is a great heiress, no doubt. Large estates—and then one has heard of the treasures at Montaigne. And those Saint-Gervais are actually made of intrigue—and see what a character they bear, even among the peasants. Evidently there is a struggle before me."

When she reached her own rooms she said to the Mère de la Mothaye: "What do you think of this hurried expedition, Mother? It seems to you romantic? I assure you it is necessary."

"Madame, you know best," said the *chapelaine*. "Certainly it is rather like an adventure in the Middle Ages."

"It may be so—it may be so," said the Abbess thoughtfully. "But now oblige me by sending to ask the Mother Prioress if she will be good enough to come to me. I cannot tell how long I may be absent, and there is much to arrange,"

CHAPTER III

AN UNINVITED GUEST

It was not more than four-and-twenty hours since Grand-Gui had left the Forest of Mont-aigle, when he found himself again running through its depths, in the train of the Abbess of Fontevrault. The first beauty of the day had clouded over, and once more the autumn wind was blowing, and all through the afternoon, as the coach, with its six horses, outriders, and running footmen, ploughed and laboured its way through the heavy or stony roads, across a country which had not long ago been very dangerous and even now was not too safe, wild storms of rain came driving over from the west, half blinding horses and men and making the slow progress slower.

The moon hardly rose in time to light them through the forest, and when she did rise there was only a vague confusing glimmer through the dark hurrying clouds and the rocking tree-tops. The new road, however, was plain enough, and Grand-Gui ran in front to guide the postilions, while torches lit by some of the men flared from side to side, sometimes blown

right out by the wind tearing through glade or gully, sometimes making a fine blaze round the coach and plunging the shadowy woodland into deeper darkness.

At last the cavalcade, trampling and rumbling on its way, came to a sudden and unexpected halt. The shouts of men mingled with the long howling gusts of wind, and brought great alarm to the *Mère de la Mothaye*, who, by the Abbess's command, opened the window and put out her head into the stormy evening.

"Madame," she said, "may the Blessed Virgin preserve us! I believe we have fallen into a den of robbers. Where are we? I have no idea. The whole thing may be a trick, and that enormous man may be one of the gang. There was something very strange in his looks; I thought so from the first, as the Reverend Mothers here will bear me witness. I believe we are in danger of our lives, madame!"

"I hope not, dear Mother," said Madame de Fontevrault from the depths of the coach. "In that case we must prepare to die bravely. But where are the men? Call some of them, Mother, I beg of you. We will at least know the reason why we are losing time."

"Yes, madame. Pierre, Barnabé, Philippe, Marc, Michel! — Holy Virgin! I see more giants. And what is that? A dwarf! This is a terrible journey. Ah, there is Barnabé. What is the meaning of this delay and all these ter-

rors? Madame is extremely displeased,—do you hear? What are those men?”

Barnabé was the head groom and chief of the escort. He rode the Abbess's best horse, which capered at the coach door as if its journey was only just begun, and rather interrupted his hurried explanations.

“Madame! Pardon, madame! Nothing is wrong, Reverend Mother. It is only—stand still, beast!—it is only a message from the Château de Montaigle.”

“Where is the messenger?”

It was the Abbess who spoke, and at her command the coach door was opened. She saw a group of tall, wild-looking men, of whom Grand-Gui was still the tallest, and in the midst of them a small gaily-dressed figure, with yellow locks flying in the wind. One of his companions lifted him to the step of the coach. Torches were flaming about him. They also lighted up the beautiful earnest face of the Abbess as she leaned forward anxiously.

“Madame la Marquise has sent me to meet Madame l'Abbesse,” l'Oiselet said, his eager eyes raised to hers, his small face very pale. “She knew that madame would come to her—but she asks the favour that madame will insist on seeing her alone—quite alone. She has things to say—the last wishes of a dying person—madame will understand.”

“But certainly. There is no hope, then?”

"Ah, no! Madame la Marquise is dying—dying."

"And Monsieur le Marquis—does he know that I am coming?"

"No, madame. No one knows but myself, and madame's woman, and her foster-father and brothers, who are here."

"Will there be any difficulty at the château—in admitting us, for instance?" asked Madame de Fontevrault, not so much to satisfy any doubts of her own as to remove the consternation painted on the face of the Mère de la Mothaye.

"I think not, madame. But haste, haste before all things."

The dwarf's face was even more eager than his words, and his eyes, as he gazed at the Abbess, seemed to her full of terror and warning.

"Remain at the coach door, boy," she said. "I have other questions to ask. En avant, Barnabé—to the château."

Once more the cavalcade tramped and rumbled on, l'Oiselet riding on the broad step of the coach, and from time to time answering the Abbess through the open window. Once more, at the outskirts of the forest, before they entered the village of Montaigle, the Abbess ordered a stoppage, descended with her attendant nuns, and prayed for a few minutes, careless of descending sheets of rain, at the foot of the old Calvary which stands by the roadside there, with fresh flowers and green boughs piled for ever about it. One after another the torches were

blown out in that exposed place, but not before their light had flamed very strangely and solemnly on the Figure with outstretched arms lifted high above the two weeping, adoring forms of St. John and St. Mary Magdalene. The darkness here was not so deep, and the moon, rising a little higher, suffused the clouds with whiteness.

The cottages and small farms of the village were scattered along each side of a long straggling street, in the midst of which the church and churchyard stood on slightly rising ground. On each side, to the north and south of the village, low meadows with lines of poplars, shadowy in the dusk, lay along the valley of a small stream that ran into the river Loir. At the end of the village the road crossed a narrow stone bridge over the bed of the shallow stream, and then mounted a steep and rough ascent between rounded masses of walnut and chestnut trees. Here it was barred suddenly by a high pair of iron gates between two round towers.

These gates swung slowly back after a minute's delay, and with a loud cracking of whips, and much plunging of tired horses urged to their utmost so as to dash up the last ascent in becoming style, the Abbess's cavalcade went clattering up a white paved road, between white walls and buildings partly overhung by great trees which cast their heavy shadows in the torchlight. Then the coach rumbled under an archway into a silent square of shuttered windows, deep

down beneath high ridges of roof and towers that seemed to soar into the sky. It drew up at the foot of a double flight of steps in the centre of the principal building. All the running escort, the wild figures from the forest, the dwarf messenger in his gay jacket, had disappeared by this time; only the Abbess's head groom and four outriders attended her into these inner precincts of the château. In the distance, in the yards below, there was a chorus of barking dogs, but here the darkness and silence gave a strange sort of welcome, and Mother de la Mothaye's mind, at least, was full of undefined fears as she looked nervously out of the window.

But in fact there was only a delay of two or three minutes before servants with lights came hurrying, the fat major-domo at their head, and the news of the Abbess's arrival seemed to have been carried by magic throughout the castle. For no sooner were the doors set open than a quiet little gentleman appeared, advancing from the sombre background of the great dimly-lit hall. He descended the steps as the Abbess got out of her coach, and bowed with stiff but courtly grace over the hand she held out to him.

"You are surprised to see me, monsieur," the Abbess began.

"If I am surprised, madame, I am also and still more honoured," replied the Marquis de Montaigle, solemnly.

The Abbess thanked him. "Still," she said,

"I feel that my arrival in this unexpected fashion needs an apology. Will you receive it?"

He bowed again. His manner was naturally so dry and expressionless that it was difficult to know whether he was pleased or angry.

"Poor Diane! If she has not become a piece of wood herself by this time, it is wonderful," thought the Abbess.

"My apology and my excuse are one thing, monsieur," she said, very gently and graciously. "Your wife is my cousin, as you know: we were intimate friends eighteen years ago, and on hearing the news of her illness, I felt that I must for the sake of old times venture on a visit. May I dare to hope that the news which reached me was exaggerated—that her illness is less serious than report represents it——?"

The Marquis threw up his hands. "Ah, madame!" he exclaimed.

"I am not too late?"

"Not altogether too late. I have sent for the Curé as a witness in some legal business, and after that I expect that he will think the last sacraments necessary. The family is assembled in her room, taking leave of her. Do you wish to see her? I doubt whether she will recognise you. Later, perhaps, for a moment, after the Curé has been here. I do not know, indeed—the family are all there—another person might agitate her. She is feverish and excitable. Weak as she is, she stares about the room and listens to every sound. I ought to be there—

but a few minutes ago I felt that I could bear it no longer. I came down here into the hall and walked up and down, waiting for the Curé. Thus I heard your coach drive up. Let me lead you into the salon, and I will order supper. You will excuse any confusion. We are rough people here—it is a long way from Versailles, madame.”

A faint flush rose in Madame de Fontevrault's cheeks, for she understood his hidden meaning. She had heard much of the ferocious disposition of the Marquis de Montaigle, who shut himself up here in this half-fortified stronghold, in the midst of his huge estates, and lived in passive opposition to the will of the King, which was that all his nobles should worship personally round his throne. She had heard also that Monsieur de Montaigle always bore his wife a grudge for being the first cousin of Madame de Montespan. Unlike most men of his time, he was not ready to bow down to immorality because the King had made it fashionable. In consequence of this, the character he bore at Versailles was that of a bear, a savage, almost a rebel. In consequence of this, too, his wife had never been able to keep up any connection with the Abbey of Fontevrault and its Superior. Thus the Abbess had good reason for doubting the sort of reception she might meet with from her cousin's husband; and on the whole she was pleasantly surprised. In her heart she felt some respect for the little Marquis's moral strictness: even she herself had been accused

of Jansenist opinions by the easy-going world of that day—and she was inclined to forgive his sour and unmannerly fling at Versailles, and only to notice the evident sincerity of his grief for his wife.

“Disagreeable, but honest,” she thought to herself. “Uneasy and suspicious—perhaps because I am a Mortemart, perhaps because it is his natural character; but yet a man whom any clever woman should be able to manage. Poor Diane was always too gentle, too like my poor mother. What would she have become, *par exemple*, married to a husband like this? A very strange little man, to be sure—and his clothes are almost threadbare! By the bye, they always said he was a miser. And has Madame de Saint-Gervais really so much influence here?”

In answer to the Marquis, Madame de Fontevrault said, “My cousin, who that has a house like yours, or like mine, in our beautiful Anjou, cares to spend much time away from it? No supper for me, thank you. And do not take me into the salon, but to your wife’s room. I know something of medicine, and possibly—but in any case, the affection of an old friend will not hurt her.”

“The room is full of people,” the Marquis muttered uncertainly.

Madame de Fontevrault looked him straight in the face.

“Who are they?” she said. “Send them all

away at least for a few minutes. I am one of your wife's nearest relations, and as young girls we loved each other. Do not doubt me. It is not I who would blame you for keeping Diane away from Versailles. You cannot imagine that I love that atmosphere."

"But why, then, madame——?"

"Why do I go there myself? Why have I just returned, as you may probably have heard, from a long visit there? Cousin, duty leads each of us in a different path. Only trust my good intentions, and take me to our dear Diane."

Whatever the influence of Madame de Saint-Gervais might be, the beauty, the dignity, the frankness, the evident goodness, the charm of manner, the Mortemart way of saying things, to which Monsieur de Montaigle succumbed at once like other people without knowing what it was that conquered him—all this quite overcame that influence for the moment. He bowed, and the Abbess's wish became law.

"Follow me, madame," he said, and they disappeared together, the two alone, up the great cold staircase and through the dismal unfurnished corridors and passages of the old house.

The wind screamed outside, rattling the vanes on the towers, but the strongest tempest that ever blew would hardly have shaken those walls ten or twelve feet thick and as old as the Crusades. The Marquis, carrying a light in his hand, went on first and silently; the Abbess in her long white habit followed him. The memory of her

cousin as a gentle, pretty, affectionate girl of seventeen was strongly present in her mind. Poor Diane! Sixteen years of marriage with a dry stick like this, even then ugly and shabby in appearance, though one of the noblest and richest men in France, and old enough to be her father! Sixteen years of imprisonment in this rugged old fortress! It did not seem wonderful that the tender spirit should spread its wings for flight.

Suddenly the Marquis stopped, and lifted the latch of a heavy door, which groaned as he pushed it open.

"This is one way into my wife's room," he said. "In this room, which we call the upper guard-room, one of my ancestresses is supposed to wait for the souls of those who pass away in the inner chamber there, where our family usually die. For me, I have no such superstition—nor you, madame, I suppose? At any rate, the room is empty now."

Madame de Fontevrault hesitated a moment. As he opened the door and turned to speak to her, she had distinctly seen a dark figure flit across between himself and the high uncurtained windows, in deep recesses, which looked out into the night. Her ears too had caught a step on the uneven brick floor.

"I hope your ancestress may have long to wait, this time," she said in her most gentle and even tones. "You will really grant me the favour of seeing my cousin alone?"

“You shall have your way, Madame l’Abbesse,” he answered a little roughly, and led the way across the empty, echoing guard-room, through a curtained archway, and across another room stiffly furnished with rows of chairs, into the high dark chamber where so many Montaignes had died. There was no light in the anteroom except what the Marquis carried, and no one was to be seen there, but Madame de Fontevrault was quite sure that quick steps flew on almost noiselessly before them, and that the curtain over the bedroom door was still shaking when the Marquis touched it. It sounds almost heartless, but a smile curled her lips as she stepped forward into the presence of her dying cousin ; an involuntary smile given to the thought : “What terrors for the dear Mother de la Mothaye, if she were only here !”

CHAPTER IV

DIANE

IN spite of the calm stateliness of her exterior, so worthy of the great community she ruled, Madame Gabrielle was woman of the world enough to enjoy the discomfiture of the Montaigle family party which had gathered round her poor cousin's death-bed. It was as Diane's messenger had said. There was the Marquis's distant cousin but nearest relation, Alexandre de Montaigle, Comte de Saint-Gervais, tall, graceful, courtier-like, dressed in the latest fashion; and his wife, small, slender, determined, with bright crafty eyes that saw everything; and his son, the Vicomte de Vassy, a clumsy youth of twenty. There also was the doctor from La Flèche in his spectacles; and another little official, who looked like a notary, keeping guard over a table with papers lying on it; and Master Baudouin, steward and régisseur, keeping guard over *him*; and two waiting-women and several other servants in the background. Near the door, separate from the rest, stood a handsome boy of fifteen, watching the

scene with wide blue eyes in a half frightened, half fascinated way.

In the centre of the dimly-lighted room, raised on a dais from the floor, there was an enormous bedstead with heavy curtains, now all drawn back. Something very wasted and shadowy lay on a pile of embroidered pillows; and thrown at full length across the dark velvet counterpane, the most conspicuous object in the room, lay the figure of a child in a white frock, with long brown locks that hid its face, escaping from their usual bondage.

One of the sick woman's arms, the hand and wrist painfully thin, lay round the child's neck. Her women, with the doctor's help, had just restored her from a fainting attack following on a paroxysm of coughing. After each of these attacks they said that she could not live through another. But still it seemed that she was stronger than they knew. The colour flamed up again in the pale face, and the eyes wandered round and round the room, as if seeking for somebody who was not there; then they fell and rested with unspeakable sadness on the soft outline of the child, who clung there and resisted all persuasions and commands to leave her mother.

"Never in all my experience, did I see a child so absolutely wicked, disobedient, and undisciplined," said Madame de Saint-Gervais, standing at the foot of the bed. "Only wait a little, Mademoiselle Renée. Your father will be

here directly, and you will be taken away by main force. Even now the servants—with your help, monsieur,” turning to the doctor, who shook his head.

“Wait—wait—you are too impatient,” said the lazy voice of her husband from his chair. “Why make all this disturbance? In a few hours you will do what you like with the child.”

He was considerate enough to speak low, so that his words should not reach the head of the bed. But as it was they were heard by ears he did not calculate upon, for Monsieur de Montaigle and his new guest had silently entered the room and were passing close to his chair. Rising quickly, he met a glance from the Abbess of Fontevrault which sent a feeling of discomfort even through the thick skin of his philosophy.

“Once a Mortemart, always a Mortemart,” he said to his wife later, with a bitter laugh. “The nun’s coif makes no difference.”

“Did you ever think that she was better than the others? I detest them all,” answered the Countess between her teeth.

But no outward show of unfriendly feeling was possible in Madame de Montaigle’s sick-room, and if the Saint-Gervais felt that the game was suddenly taken out of their hands, they had no means at that moment of making any resistance. It was necessary to reserve themselves, for the Marquis gave them no time even to realise what

had happened. M. de Saint-Gervais had hardly straightened his back again after a most low and reverential bow to the Abbess of Fontevrault, his wife had hardly risen from her curtsey that swept the ground, when the master of the house, having led his guest past them all into the shadow of the curtains, up the two low steps by which the great bedstead was removed from the rest of the room, turned round and said very distinctly :

“My cousins, and all who are here, be good enough to leave us alone. Madame l’Abbesse de Fontevrault has travelled here to-night to pay a private visit to my wife.”

The delicate face and neck of Madame de Saint-Gervais became crimson. She had often found it difficult to endure her cousin Montaigle’s unceremonious manners, but to be sent out of the room pell-mell with servants, doctor, and notary was almost more than she could bear. She stood her ground for an instant, while her husband retreated obediently towards the door.

“And the little Renée—will she go with me, dear cousin?” she said in a thin voice which quivered a little, though meant to be calm and sweet. “For the last hour she has only made her poor mother more feverish, and if Madame de Fontevrault has anything serious to say, she will certainly be a sad distraction.”

Monsieur de Montaigle turned to the Abbess, who bent her head, and herself, leaning tenderly over the dying woman, gently removed her arm from the child’s neck.

“Go away quietly, little one,” she whispered to the child, “for your dear mother’s sake. You shall come back to her presently—it is I who tell you so—your aunt De Rochechouart: you will believe me?”

The child said nothing, but after a long look she quietly allowed her father to lift her from the bed. Madame de Saint-Gervais held out her hand to lead her away, a faint smile of triumph hovering about her lips and eyes. Behind her in the twilight loomed the sturdy figure of her son, and on his sulky face a look of something like pleasure replaced the vague uneasiness caused by the Abbess of Fontevrault’s arrival. Monsieur Jean was ambitious enough to share in his father and mother’s schemes, and keen enough, with all his half-animal stupidity, to see that the safe possession of the little heiress was almost necessary to their future success.

But Mademoiselle Renée, if she had left her mother in obedience to the new voice and eyes which spoke to her little heart with such irresistible power, was by no means less rebellious, less independent, or more ready to be led quietly away by a hand she detested. She glanced quickly round in the half-darkness through her streaming hair, then sprang like a young fawn from the daïs, and darted with a low cry of “Nico, Nico!” towards the great door that led to the staircase, flinging herself into the arms of the boy who stood there waiting for his elders to pass out before him. He blushed to the roots

of his fair curly hair, but received the flying child with perfect grace and readiness. Half carrying her as she clung desperately round his neck, with a quick glance over his shoulder at Madame de Saint-Gervais, he fled from the room without any more formalities.

“That Nicolas again!” Monsieur Jean de Vassy might have been heard to mutter. “One of these days I must teach him not to meddle with my property.”

Monsieur de Montaigne lingered in the room till everybody was gone, and then without a word withdrew himself into the anteroom through which he had brought the Abbess a few minutes before. As he walked across into the guardroom, carrying a candlestick in his hand, he was this time conscious of a figure that flitted before him and slipped into the dark recess of the window. He thought he heard whispers through the crying of the wind. He stopped short, and though he was neither cowardly nor superstitious, a chilly shiver seized him. Who was this, lurking so near his dying wife’s room? Was there anything in the old story after all?

“What is that? Who are you?” he said sharply.

He almost blushed with shame at his momentary weakness when a slim dark-eyed woman came forward at once into the flickering light of his candle. “It is I—Agathe—Monsieur le Marquis,” she said.

“Get you gone, then,” he answered angrily.

"I will have no one loitering and listening at doors—do you hear? Your mistress does not want you now."

"Ah, pardon, monsieur," said Agathe, shaking her head with a smile, "madame always wants me. I do nothing without her orders, and it is by her wish that I am waiting here. And I know quite enough without listening at doors."

"I suspect you do!" muttered the Marquis. "The best women gossip with their servants, it seems." He was always sorry to come within reach of Mademoiselle Agathe's tongue, and had long felt a dull kind of jealousy of his wife's favourite waiting-woman. "If it is her wish—" he grumbled on. "Yes, it may be as well to have a servant within call. But only yourself, Agathe. No one else, remember. Did I hear you talking as I came into the room?"

"Talking, monsieur! to whom should I talk? Truly it would be pleasant to have a companion on a night like this. Not that I have any heart for talking, indeed. Monsieur le Marquis may well have heard me sigh."

"What is that in the corner—in the window?"

"A chair, monsieur. The large chair with cushions, where madame used to sit sometimes to look out at the stars."

"Ah!" grunted the Marquis.

His candle seemed to throw more shadows than light as he raised it and peered into the recess. Perhaps there was only a chair. Not that he believed a word the woman said; but he

could not examine more closely without pushing past her, which was impossible; and after all it did not matter much.

"You are not afraid to wait here alone in the dark, Agathe?" he said.

"I have eyes like a cat, monsieur. The darker it is the better I can see."

He walked on without saying more. The rooms echoed with his steady tread; his light, gradually disappearing, flickered on the walls and ceiling. He crossed the guardroom beyond, and its heavy door clanged after him. Agathe retreated into the recess, where there was in fact a great chair with cushions. There was also somebody crouching behind it, who raised himself with a low laugh as Agathe took her seat in the chair.

"Hush, hush, little fool!" she said hastily. "If the poor master does not know his friends, we must teach him—voilà! Now go and fetch the children, but as quietly as a mouse, mind! We have stopped that little game for the moment, but I don't like trusting Mademoiselle Renée out of my sight."

All through the great Château de Montaigne there was a feeling of restless anxiety, in which servants and their masters seemed alike to share. Almost furiously, in their own rooms, the Saint-Gervais family discussed the unexpected arrival which had overthrown their plans for the moment. The notary actually there, the promise of betrothal written out, which was to be signed

by responsible relations and to make the marriage of Jean de Montaigle, Vicomte de Vassy, with his cousin Renée de Montaigle—but the names and particulars of these two young people stretched through several lines of cramped writing—an almost certain event in the future, besides making the Saint-Gervais family natural guardians of the little heiress in case of her father's death! And now the entrance of an uninvited guest brought delay at least to all this satisfactory settlement. Uninvited! there seemed no doubt of that. The Marquis was not a man of intrigue and mystery; not at all the person to send for the Abbess of Fontevrault without speaking of his intention. Besides, he was well known to dislike the Mortemart family as much as his relations did. Why and how had the reverend lady appeared at this most unfortunate moment? It seemed very like some inspiration from Versailles, some deep-laid plot to foil the Saint-Gervais plans. Yet this sounded almost too presumptuous, considering that Madame de Montespan's star was waning fast in this year 1680, while that of Madame de Maintenon, already an honoured friend of Madame de Saint-Gervais, was gradually rising higher. But the Mortemart insolence might still be equal to anything.

In another part of the château the Mère de la Mothaye, and the other nuns who had accompanied Madame de Fontevrault, sat together in

a state of some impatience and anxiety. The good chapelaine was troubled with the thought that her beloved Superior should have gone away alone into the depths of this great savage house, which seemed to her perfectly terrifying. In the room where she and the nuns sat nothing was to be heard but the wild voice of the storm which roared round the towers. Madame might be in the sorest need of help and companionship: how were her faithful nuns to know? Mother de la Mothaye crossed herself at these thoughts and struck her breast many times. It seemed clear that she ought to have insisted on her right of attending the Abbess wherever she went. It was her own fault, her own weakness.

“I have no strength of mind, no character. I am not fit for my post. I shall tell the dear madame so, if ever I am happy enough to see her again.”

In kitchen and stables the servants were talking, and by the help of the Abbess's grooms knew something more than their masters, though they were of course ignorant of the full meaning and consequence of what had happened. The steward and the major-domo were wise men, admirers of the rising sun; but in spite of their influential posts, they were almost alone on the side of the Saint-Gervais family.

Amidst all this varied confusion two children had stolen away together, the boy trying, not quite in vain, to comfort his companion in an agony of sobs and tears.

Young Nicolas d'Aumont had spent most of his childhood as a page at Montaigle. He was the only child of the Comte d'Aumont's second marriage, a somewhat romantic affair, and his father, dying soon after, had left his old friend Monsieur de Montaigle guardian to the boy. It was not a good arrangement from a worldly point of view, for it separated Nicolas from his two brothers, much older than himself and high in favour in Versailles. He was now about to begin life, however, with a commission in one of the King's regiments of dragoons. He and Renée had been playfellows from her infancy; she was Nico's little love; but the necessary separation of their future lives, of which Renée herself was still quite unconscious, threw its shadow already over him. He was old enough, too, to understand something of what life had in store for Renée, and to be troubled by the thought of it.

The Marquis came down into the great hall, and walked up and down there with a moody countenance. He was still waiting for the Curé, who had in fact been summoned to a sick man in the village; but the delay did not matter now. With a dull, dead sadness, perhaps even more pathetic than violent grief, Monsieur de Montaigle thought of his dying wife in the great chamber upstairs. What a smile Diane had given that cousin of hers, and with what a movement of long-sought peacefulness her head had nestled down into the Abbess's supporting arm!

“Friends in youth! well, what harm is there? What right have my cousins of Saint-Gervais to complain? It was a happy chance—what chance, I wonder?—that carried the news of Diane’s illness to her cousin of Fontevrault, and it was a good action on her part to visit us. I believe she is a good woman, whatever they say, and upon my faith she is a handsome one! They shall have their way, those two—my poor Diane and her cousin. They shall be together as long as they please, and no relations of mine shall come between them. I am still master in my house, though I believe some people think—Voilà Monsieur le Curé—no, it is the wind—what a night! what a night for a poor soul to pass away in!”

He sat down suddenly, the stiff little master of the house, in one of the great chairs that stood around the hall, and putting up his hand to his eyes, found to his own astonishment that his fingers were wet.

“Ma pauvre Diane!” he muttered.

As usual, the one peaceful place was in the very heart and centre of the storm. The Abbess’s first action was to make her cousin drink a famous cordial made at Fontevrault, a bottle of which she had carried in the folds of her habit. Under its calming and reviving influence and that of the tender strength which supported her, Madame de Montaigne seemed to return to life for a time.

“You remember, Gabrielle—you remember it

all?" she whispered painfully, as she lay in her cousin's arms, having enjoyed in silence, for a few moments, the luxury of being alone with her.

"I have forgotten nothing, dearest."

The thoughts of both had flown back to the old Paris convent, where they had spent their young days together—the old Abbaye-aux-Bois, with its high dark roofs and picturesque turrets and chimneys, then in the days of its glory. Among the girls of noble birth who were educated there, and afterwards either made great matches or became religieuses of more or less distinction, the convent had never had a more brilliant pupil than Mademoiselle de Mortemart; and her cousin, Mademoiselle de Grandseigne, her mother's niece, was like her shadow. But she, shy and timid, had had her life arranged for her in a very different fashion from the high-spirited Gabrielle.

And now, for a short time, the two cousins had forgotten all that lay between, even to the sad circumstances which had brought them together once more, and Diane wasted, it might seem, the short time left to her, in recollections of the old life and the old companions.

"Do you remember this—and that? What became of her? Ah, how pretty she was—do you remember that I was jealous of her? Yes, I was very jealous—but never of you, and you were so much more beautiful than any of them. Let me see your dear eyes again! Do you know that paper you wrote has always been my

greatest treasure—and then the time came for me to send it to you. I sent it without Monsieur de Montaigle's knowledge—he would not have refused, I think; but if your cousin Françoise de Saint-Gervais had known, it would never have reached you. And I could not die—and leave my little Renée—to her!”

She said all this with long pauses and intervals. The Abbess, leaning over her, drew her into an even more tender embrace.

“Be perfectly at ease, my dear Diane. Renée is to be my child—you give her to me?”

“Yes, yes; but you must arrange it with her father. Understand—I cannot endure that she should marry Jean de Vassy.”

“That lout who was standing behind the Comtesse? I should think not!”

“Ah, yes—that lout!” repeated Madame de Montaigle, with almost a laugh. “You are not changed, my Gabrielle. But remember that he and his father, after my husband, are the heads of the family. And I know they have all made up their minds that this marriage must be. They will not let the estates, the fortune, pass out of the family. My husband too says it must be; and just now, when you came, they were going to sign some sort of promise—the notary was ready. I knew it—and I said they must wait for Monsieur le Curé—and Agathe, my woman, watched there in the guardroom till you came. Even I, through the wind, heard your coach drive up, Gabrielle.”

"Well, well, these good people must be disappointed," the Abbess murmured thoughtfully. "In any case, no promise must be made till the child is older. A great fortune is a great danger—and I suppose they have the new Versailles on their side, which makes it more difficult—still, I have my little influence. Who was the young gentleman that carried the child away? Not a younger Saint-Gervais?"

"Ah, no, little Nicolas—the little Chevalier d'Aumont. We have had him here since he was a child. M. de Montaigle is his guardian. His poor mother—you must remember that history."

"Ah, I know. Then his parents are both dead, and he has two elder brothers, and no prospects of his own."

"No, poor Nico! My sons might have been like him—or—how often have I wished that Jean de Vassy was such another!"

"I understand."

"But that is useless. I hope—Nico hopes—that his guardian or some of his own family will find energy enough to send in his proofs for Malta."

"Yes, that is the only thing to be done for him."

Then there was a long silence—so long, so deep, only broken by the wild howls of the wind, that Madame de Fontevrault thought her cousin had fainted, exhausted by the unusual effort and excitement of talking. But she saw that Diane's eyes were open, as she lay breathing heavily

and that there was even a smile as she looked into her face and softly kissed the damp brow.

Presently she made her drink another dose of the soothing and strengthening cordial, and then Madame de Montaigle began to speak again of her little Renée and to ask for her.

"She may come back now—now that you know all—and my poor little dwarf, my singing-bird, I must say a word to him. Where is Agathe? Dear, when you take Renée away, take Agathe too. And he, poor little fellow, would give his life for her, but I do not know if there is any place for him in a convent. He will miss me more than any of them. Some players left him outside the château gates when they went away. He was very little then, but people wanted to drive him off into the forest. But I took him up and carried him in, and Monsieur de Montaigle let him stay. It was a fancy of mine—you see, he has been good to me. And then, Gabrielle, there is my old Guillaume—and there are his sons—the most faithful—you know, the husband and children of old Babette who nursed me."

"Ah, yes, dearest. It was one of the sons who brought your message, an immensely tall man."

"I know. That is another person who would give his life for my Renée. Remember."

"If it depends on me, Renée shall have her bodyguard—her giant and her dwarf! It is like a fairy tale."

"You *are* good! I knew, if you were once here, I could die in peace."

Time was slipping away as the Abbess lingered, listening to her cousin's murmured words, watching every change in the shadowed face on the pillow. Her heart was stirred with deep pain at this hurried close of the love of a lifetime,—a real love, however interrupted, however subject to separation if not forgetfulness. She was conscious that through these years of business and dignity at Fontevrault she might have thought oftener of her gentle cousin who led an even more truly cloistered life at Montaigle. She need not quite so easily have accepted Monsieur de Montaigle's prejudices as her rule of conduct. She had known that Diane, in health and strength at least, was never a person to take the first step. Well, regrets were of no use now! at least, when the summons came, she had done what she could; and she promised herself to make ample amends in the future. Diane, dead, should guide and guard her child's life as she never could have done living.

"Foi de Mortemart! my poor Diane, I have fought your battles often enough in play. I will fight them in earnest now."

But the end was drawing near; deathly weakness was stealing on, and there was much yet for the poor Marquise to go through—farewells, religious duties, and all the formalities without which a person of her distinction could

not leave this world with propriety. The Abbess knew all this, and yet she lingered, unwilling to acknowledge that her presence and her cordial could do no more than rouse the flame of life to one last flicker. She did not, however, deceive herself long, if at all really. Slowly she rose from her place beside the bed, wondering how she was to call any of the household. Between the great gusts of wind which howled in the windows and the chimney there was a silence so profound that the house might have been empty. The air in the room seemed thick; the lights smoked and burned dimly; the dying woman breathed with pain, and her sharp gasps followed the Abbess as she glided across the floor.

She opened the nearest door, that of the ante-room through which the Marquis had brought her, and stepping through it, was conscious of a moment's terror, which made her smile to herself afterwards. The room was full of white light, in the broad stream of which she saw a group of people, quite still and silent. The fact was that since the Marquis passed through, the moon had risen above the opposite parapet, and now shone straight in at the high uncurtained window.

For a moment the Abbess stood motionless; and in her black veil and white habit, the moonlight making her unnaturally pale, she looked even more unearthly than the figures on whom she was gazing.

"She is dead! Madame is dead!" one of them sighed just above his breath.

"Ah, mon Dieu! and without the sacraments!" murmured another.

Madame de Fontevrault became suddenly angry.

"What are you all doing here? What is this masquerade?" she asked. "Go, then—go and call Monsieur le Marquis and all the château, if you please, and my nuns to me. Madame de Montaigle is alive, good people, and is asking for her little daughter. Where is she?"

"I am here, madame."

Renée, slender and small, sprang out from the circle that guarded her round and that followed her quickly and silently into the inner room, Madame de Fontevrault leading her by the hand. Agathe had flown, according to orders, to warn the Marquis and the nuns, but Nicolas d'Aumont followed his little friend, even on to the daïs, and knelt down close to the bed where she had once more thrown herself. Two strange figures bent their knees in the shadow, a little farther off,—Grand-Gui the giant, and l'Oiselet the dwarf. This little fellow could not restrain his sobs, but all the rest were quiet.

With one weak hand Madame de Montaigle tried to caress her child's hair; the other she stretched tremblingly out on the counterpane, and Nicolas, understanding her, came closer and touched it with his lips; then it rested for a few moments on his bent head.

"You will be a brave man—a brave soldier, Nico—but do not forget your little sister."

"Never, madame!"

The room was already filling with people, and one by one the old servants crept up to kiss their mistress's hand and say farewell. First of all came her foster-father, old Guillaume, with his three strong sons, and with them followed l'Oiselet. The Marquise gave her poor dwarf a smile, but only Grand-Gui had a word: "Faithful friend—you will guard Mademoiselle Renée with your life, if she needs it."

"Madame knows that I will," growled Grand-Gui, as he slipped back into the darkness.

"Chère Diane, you know that your Renée will be surrounded with loving relations and friends," said the clear voice of Madame de Saint-Gervais, who boldly advanced to embrace her cousin under the very shadow of the Abbess of Fontevrault keeping guard over her pillow. "And even if no formal promise has yet been made, it is understood on both sides—though even now it is not too late, if it would be more satisfactory—but at least you may be sure that I shall be a mother to the child."

She had hardly spoken when she started back in alarm, for instead of waiting to receive her offered kiss, Diane de Montaigle sat suddenly upright and waved her back with one hand, drawing the child's head closer with the other. Life, bright and indignant, flashed up once again in the pathetic brown eyes, and the voice which

spoke was loud and clear, without any perceptible effort or pain. Monsieur de Montaigle held up his hand to warn the Curé and his assistants, who were just entering the large door of the room, followed by Mother de la Mothaye and the other nuns. All held their breath and listened to that voice which rang so strangely and piercingly.

“No—I will not have it—no! I leave my child in the charge of my cousin the Abbess of Fontevrault. She will educate her—she will make a suitable marriage for her when the time comes. No, I will have no such promises. The happiness of my child shall not be sacrificed to these family arrangements. Ah, I have never had the courage to speak, but I will not die without making my wishes known. I implore my husband to carry them out. If I am disobeyed, my curse shall rest on this house and on the marriage they make in it. But it shall never be! I myself, with God’s permission, will return to earth to prevent it.”

Her words ended in a shrill cry, and she fell back insensible on her pillows. A sort of thrill, for a moment, kept every one motionless, then doctor and waiting-women rushed forward. Madame de Saint-Gervais stood her ground, flushing scarlet and saying aloud, “This is delirium. The poor thing is not herself. Come, my little Renée, this is not the place for you. Come away with me, child—little demon!”

The last words were muttered between her

teeth, for Renée clung to her fainting mother, and Madame de Fontevrault was saying with stern politeness, "Have the goodness, madame, to stand aside, that the doctor may pass."

The Comte de Saint-Gervais put up a handkerchief to his face, and laughed behind it; his son glared furiously, first at the dying Marquise, then at every one in the room by turns: he was quite aware that his friends there were few. The Marquis de Montaigle stood like a statue at the foot of the bed, and no one could tell what effect his wife's last words had had on him.

For they were her last words; though it was not till long after midnight, after hours through which the voice of religion alone was heard, that the great bell clanged out from the château, and the solemn chiming of the church bells answered it. Then the villagers woke up and crossed themselves, and knew that the gentle soul of their lady had gone out alone into the stormy weather.

CHAPTER V

FORTUNE-HUNTERS

DURING the few days before Madame de Montaigle was buried there was a kind of armed truce between the opposing forces at the château. Diane was at rest: she lay in the state-room where she had died: her cousin Gabrielle had herself placed the crucifix at her head, and lighted the tall wax candles that stood all round. She and her nuns kept watch by turns in the room, night and day, and the other people in the house stole in sometimes to say a short prayer. Agathe led her little lady by the hand, and the child, strangely quieted, knelt and gazed with large bewildered eyes at her mother lying there so still, so awful in her white calmness, long dark lashes resting on a cheek painfully pale and hollow now that the fever flush had left it for ever. Even Madame de Saint-Gervais came and knelt like the rest, her lips moving. She had the character at Versailles of being a pious person, and was much in sympathy with Madame de Maintenon on the subject of family life and the education of the young. It seemed therefore all the more painful and surprising that

there should be any doubt about confiding little Renée to her care. However, she had every hope that poor Diane's delirious expressions would be forgotten. Her cousin Montaigle could hardly let them influence him so far as to break up an excellent family arrangement.

As to him, he wandered about through those days like a man in a dream. He left all the arrangements to his steward and the Curé of the village, a good old man, who had long acted as his chaplain, now assisted by the Abbess's own chaplain, who was summoned in haste from Fontevrault. He went into the room where his wife lay, and as he hardly spoke, no one could tell what thoughts about the future lay beneath his worn clothes and frowning brow. One day Monsieur de Saint-Gervais, urged on by his wife's anxiety, made an attempt to find out something. Looking from their windows, which were to the east of the château, they saw the little Marquis pacing up and down beside the deep dry moat, over which an old drawbridge, now permanently let down, led straight into the wild, untrimmed, forest-like depths of the park. There had once been a stately avenue on this side, but it was long unused, and overgrown with grass. It ended on one of the great high-roads of the country, several miles away. The unsociable soul of the present owner preferred that his house should be approached on one side only, and that the least convenient. In making his road through the forest he had known very

well that it would still be a barrier to the more timid travellers.

The dark figure of the Marquis looked very small and lonely, walking as he was in the wide shadow cast eastward by towers and roofs. Beyond, the country shone in October sunlight which gilded the already yellow lines of trees, and made two large fishponds in the park sparkle and glitter.

"Poor man! he is certainly very solitary," said Monsieur de Saint-Gervais. "I should not have expected him to feel her death acutely, for he troubled himself little enough about her in her lifetime. However, there may be some superstition under that leathern exterior. I should not have thought it, and I have known the worthy Mathieu longer than most people. But that threat of a curse and so forth—one never knows the limit of human weakness. Every one in the room, too, heard the words."

"Mere delirium," said Madame de Saint-Gervais impatiently.

"Pardon, madame, not altogether. Our poor cousin had taken a dislike to Jean, and I am not sure that I think it unreasonable. Jean is not a courtier. Physically he is admirable. He will live for centuries, and carry on the line of Montaigne successfully. But even his mother's partiality cannot call him amiable or agreeable. I do not think he is popular with anybody. He beats the servants and the dogs——"

"What is the use of finding fault with your

own son? You agree, then, with Diane? In that case we had better give up the marriage, let the child be carried off by the nuns, and make a present of Montaigle and all its belongings to the Abbey of Fontevrault—or to some protégé of the Mortemart family. Madame de Montespan loves match-making. She will be enchanted.”

Monsieur de Saint-Gervais smiled his brilliant cold smile—he was proud of his teeth—and made his wife a low bow.

“You are always right, madame,” he said. “I do not myself feel inclined to throw up the game so easily, but yet——”

“Then do something! If we stir neither hand nor foot in the matter, I assure you that the Abbess will carry off the child.”

“Patience! If the worst comes to the worst, you can carry her off yourself. Monsieur Jean can run away with his future wife—pity she is not a few years older! What is her age, by-the-by?”

“Nine—ten—how should I know? In mind she is a perfect baby, and her poor mother, besides indulging every fancy she had, and bringing her up in the most impossible fashion, taught her all her own prejudices. Carry her off, indeed! She would scratch our eyes out by the way.”

“Oh, as to that, one can always try a little discipline,” said the Count, yawning slightly. “After all, a child is a child. Once in our hands, we should be masters of the situation.”

Madame de Saint-Gervais did not reply at

once. She stood by the window looking into quiet depths of evening shadow, her eyes following the small stooping figure of the head of the house as he marched up and down, his hands behind his back. She was not entirely thinking of him, however. Presently she turned her head towards her husband, and said in a low, even voice, her eyes glittering eagerly—"You do not mean what you say, Alexandre? You do not really suggest that we should—that Jean should—it would be robbery, would it not—lawlessness, crime?"

"Fifty years ago there would have been nothing very strange in it," said the Count, with an indifferent air. "Now, I agree with you, it might be rather out of date, especially as the child's father is alive and in his senses. But I believe you would do anything rather than have our plan spoilt."

"Anything that was not absolutely illegal—and impious. That is, if I could be quite sure it was wise."

"Ah, prudence! Yes, there are times, are there not? when one has to place that virtue a little above piety. All the better when they go together."

"In this case I believe they do," said Madame de Saint-Gervais thoughtfully, while her husband watched her with his bitter smile. "No—I agree with you, it is tempting; but at present, since the child's father is alive, as you say, there is only one thing we can do safely, and that is,

to drag the formal promise from him as soon as possible. Then, I think, he cannot refuse to give us charge of the child—or if he chooses to keep her here, I can easily find a lady to live here and manage her. In any case the Abbess will have no right to interfere.”

“Will her Saintliness take the trouble to inquire into that matter of right, do you think?”

“Probably not; she is unprincipled to the last degree. But if we have Mathieu on our side, she cannot do much, after all. And do you see, if he plays us false now, he goes against all his traditions, pulls down his house with his own hands, besides submitting to the Mortemart influence, which all his life he has opposed. Why, he could not hear the name of his wife’s relations with patience! And is this wonderful change to be wrought by the Abbess’s beaux yeux and his poor wife’s last delirious words? It is ridiculous. Oh, heavens! it drives me mad to think of it!”

“Leave madness to Mathieu, I beg. Literally, such a volte-face might almost prove him mad, and then, I suppose, the little heiress would become a ward of his Majesty.”

“Ah, ah! then we should see what friendship was worth. But what an imagination you have!” said Madame de Saint-Gervais, laughing in spite of herself. “Yes,” she added in a lower tone, looking again out of the window, “it is just in that way, is it not, that madmen tramp up and down their dens?”

“Possibly! but I think they are more generally chained in a corner. Well, I shall take the liberty of joining my dear cousin in his walk. He must need my sympathy, though he does not ask for it.”

“That is a good idea: you will bring him to reason.”

“I hope so.”

With another polite bow the Count left the room, called for his hat and cane, and proceeded gracefully downstairs. His wife watched till he appeared below, and saw with satisfaction that his cousin, when he approached him with an air of kindly condolence, received him civilly.

The two men were soon deep in talk as they paced the terrace. It was already no small success, in Madame de Saint-Gervais' eyes, that her husband should be able to draw the Marquis into a serious conversation.

“Really,” she said to herself, “Alexandre is a clever man. I am too impatient, as he often tells me. Truly I believe if this matter is left to him, his diplomacy will carry it through. He has indeed a marvellous power of persuading people, of changing their minds, making them take his own view, in short. He is so reasonable, a person of such distinguished good sense. And it would be really too foolish to lose these splendid prospects for want of a little trouble and pains. Besides, so much better for the child herself, whatever her poor mother may have thought.—Great heavens, what is it!”

She started violently, turning red and pale, as something touched her shoulder. For the moment she hardly dared look round. The room, with its narrow windows, was already in twilight behind her; she had not heard the door open, or any step on the floor. In an instant, however, the mysterious silence was broken by a loud laugh, and her son, stepping from behind her chair, bent and kissed her hand.

"You took me for a ghost, madame?" he said. "For the ghost of——"

"Silence!" cried his mother indignantly. "I forbid you to speak of it. And how often am I to tell you, Jean, that I cannot endure these mountebank tricks? It astonishes me that I should have a son so utterly unconscious of what becomes a gentleman."

"I should have thought it was worse to make a noise than to walk quietly," said Jean, still grinning broadly. "Ah, voyons! there is monsieur my father walking with the old cousin Montaigle. What are they talking about? My marriage, perhaps! You will carry little Renée off with you, madame, will you not? It will be better, I assure you, for if you leave her here they will marry her to that boy D'Aumont."

"No, my poor Jean, that they will never do," said Madame de Saint-Gervais with a scornful smile.

Her sudden anger had ebbed away as she leaned back in her chair, the moment's fright and disturbance over, and contemplated the tall

young fellow who stood rather awkwardly before her. Women of her sort, small, delicate, sharp of wits, find great satisfaction in the sight of strength which, though not their own, is completely under their dominion, and till now Madame de Saint-Gervais' will had been the mainspring which moved her young Samson's muscles.

"No! there is no danger of *that*," she said.

"Madame, I tell you, it is what the servants say. They say that the Marquise told Nicolas d'Aumont that she wished he was in my place."

"Possibly, but he is not in your place. He is a penniless younger son, with nothing but his commission, and no prospect but the Order of Malta—if indeed he ever gets that. There is no chance of his standing in your way."

"If I thought there was, I would kill him."

"The real danger is Fontevrault," Madame de Saint-Gervais went on. Her eyes had wandered again to the terrace, where the two cousins were still talking earnestly: the Count, at least, was talking, while Monsieur de Montaigle listened, nodding his head now and then. "If the Abbess is once allowed to carry that child to Fontevrault, we are ruined. Either she will make her a religious, or she will marry her in time to some fortune-hunter chosen by herself. But your father will convince his cousin that this must not be. He is doing so now. You are right, Jean: it is your future that they are discussing, my son, and the future of the house of Montaigle, which depends on this alliance."

"Shall I be Marquis de Montaigle, then?"

"After our cousin's death, you mean? It is possible. Yes, I think it would probably be arranged. At present you must be patient, for you will have long to wait. Renée has to be educated, for instance."

"In the meanwhile, I will teach some people to mind their own affairs, and not to injure me," growled Monsieur Jean.

"Do you mean the little D'Aumont? Let him alone: he is going to his regiment, and will not hurt you."

"I mean the rascally spies who took the Marquise's message to Fontevrault. Madame, if it had not been for them, all would have gone well."

"What do you mean? Did the Marquise send a message to Fontevrault? I understood that the Abbess heard of her illness by chance. What treason! Tell me at once all you know."

Jean smiled triumphantly. It was something to make his impatient little mother flash round from the window and its interesting prospect to hear what he had to say. He was in no hurry, however, for he liked to tease people and keep them waiting, though this amusement was less satisfactory with his mother, and impossible with his father, the one being on earth that he really respected.

He lounged across the room to fetch a cushion, which he placed at his mother's feet, and sat down there. Then by rather slow degrees he told her a long story of how he had been talking

at the stables with the grooms from Fontevrault, and how one of them had told him that a tall forester from Montaigle had brought the Abbess a letter, on receiving which she had at once ordered her coach and outriders. Then further the man had told him how this forester had ill-treated the porter, who was his brother-in-law, and that one of these days he would have to pay the reckoning for that. Then the story was continued up to the stopping of the coach in the forest by old Guillaume and his other sons, and the Abbess's interview with the dwarf from the castle, who rode on her coach-step up to the very gates themselves.

"After that you will not say that the Abbess came by chance, madame?"

"What a set of traitors!" murmured Madame de Saint-Gervais. "Could any one have believed it? And that false woman! She had planned, then, to cheat us like this. But why should the servants have done what they must have known would be against their master's wish? He, who always hated the whole race of Mortemart. At any rate Baudouin had nothing to do with it!"

"No, he is not so stupid. But he cannot manage those foresters, and they are the Marquise's foster-brothers, remember, madame. And they would do anything to injure me. It is they who would be glad if Nicolas d'Aumont was in my place. Remember that I tell you so. That Grand-Gui, as they call him, has always been my enemy. Once, a long time ago, I was

punishing a cur that tried to bite me. That Grand-Gui came by and took it away. He was insolent, but I was too young then to punish him, and I knew it was no use to complain to the Marquis. Even now he is too big, and there are too many of them, but one of these days I shall have my turn."

"Yes. Do not concern yourself with a miserable peasant. He shall be punished, never fear," said the Comtesse, thoughtfully.

"But I shall make somebody else pay for it," muttered Jean. "That little rascal dwarf has always hated and mocked me. I have seen and heard him. Now I have a good reason for thrashing him, and his crooked carcase shall not forget me in a hurry, I promise you."

"Never mind the wretched little frog. Your aunt De Montaigle picked him out of the ditch to amuse herself—one of these days he shall go back there. Little liar and go-between! Ah! I suspect that Agathe had her full share in this business."

"One cannot so well beat a woman."

"Of course not. Patience—patience—that is what your father says to me. Soon all will be in our hands. See, he is coming back."

The gentlemen on the terrace had parted, and in a few minutes Monsieur de Saint-Gervais entered the room, a servant carrying lights before him. Jean de Vassy rose from his cushion and retreated into a corner, still smiling, but watching his father somewhat anxiously.

“Well, what does Mathieu say?” asked Madame de Saint-Gervais, as soon as the three were along together.

There was a slight flush on the Count’s handsome face, but he had an air of satisfaction. He sat down, glanced at his own elegant figure, and then deliberately surveyed his son’s solid proportions, with one of those long critical stares which Jean hated.

“That young gentleman ought to be large enough to manage his own affairs,” he said. “Well, madame, the cousin was more reasonable than I expected. He is not afraid of his wife’s ghost, I fancy, though I did not precisely ask him that question. He has no wish that his child should become a religious or a Mortemart. He will finally decide nothing till after the funeral. When Madame la Marquise is safely underground, I think all his courage will return to him, and we shall have our written promise after all. So patience, [madame—patience, Monsieur le Vicomte.”

“You should not speak like that of the poor dead!” murmured Madame de Saint-Gervais, as she clasped her hands and looked upward in thankfulness.

Her husband laughed.

“And in the meanwhile——” growled Jean, but nobody noticed him.

He had his turn again later, when his mother ordered him to tell his father the history of the Abbess’s coming to Montaigle. The Count,

however, took this very lightly. He was not at all impressed with the importance of Jean's discoveries, or with his cleverness in making them. He coolly observed that the study of the past was both easy and unprofitable, and that the future alone was worth pains and attention from an intelligent mind.

"Which yours is not," he said, with a courteous bow to his son. "Therefore, monsieur, go back to your favourite associates, who can at least teach you to ride. Leave your affairs in our hands, and amuse yourself, if possible, without adding to your unpopularity here."

"If I am a fool, I can use a sword," muttered Jean, red with anger.

"Take my advice, and do nothing of the kind," said his father.

"Then I can use a stick!"

"On dogs and horses, as much as you please, but not on men, who may bear you malice. Enough, sir: you may go."

And the hope of the Montaigles, swearing between his teeth, blundered out of the room.

"You are too severe with that poor boy," said Madame de Saint-Gervais.

"I detest fools, especially when they brag of having done something clever," answered her husband. "That youth is to me a daily sorrow and misfortune. However, let us forget his lumbering presence for ten minutes, while I tell you more of the humours of poor old Mathieu."

CHAPTER VI

SACRILEGE

THE ceremony was over. It had been attended by a good many of Monsieur de Montaigle's country neighbours, both near and distant, and they had been edified by the sight of his mourning relations with their distinguished air, and deeply impressed by the presence of the Abbess of Fontevrault with her train of nuns. Afterwards they had dined at the château, but even the most sociable and self-satisfied among them had found little comfort in this meal, presided over by the silent gloom of the Marquis and the cold and haughty airs of his cousin Saint-Gervais, who took little pains to hide his contempt for the rustic looks and ways of these country gentlemen. As evening drew on the guests ordered their horses with one accord, and clattered down the slopes and through the village street, where staring groups of peasants cheered their drooping spirits a little.

The "haute et puissante Dame Diane de Grandseigne, épouse du haut et puissant Seigneur Messire Mathieu de Montaigle, Marquis de Montaigle," was laid, like all her husband's

family, in the vault under the chapel of the château. The chapel was not a cheerful resting-place. It was a low and very ancient building, much out of repair. Green moss grew on the rugged walls and on the uneven stones of the floor. The light stole faintly in through loophole windows of old painted glass; the arches of the doors were so low that a tall man had to stoop in entering. One of the doors, the only outside entrance, opened on the steep paved yard between the first and second gates of the château opposite the stables, and just above the walled garden. Here a great chestnut tree, overhanging the wall, almost hid the low chapel archway with its cross, and the wooden penthouse, decayed by time and damp, that sheltered the chapel bell. It was through this archway that old Guillaume and his three sons, their hearts heavier than those of the mourners who followed, had carried on bent shoulders their mistress, their foster-child and sister, in the early hours of that sad morning.

The other door of the chapel connected it with the château itself, and opened half-way up the wall from a low tribune or small gallery opposite the altar, from which there was a descent by a spiral staircase in the thickness of the wall. This tribune, in times of service, was the place of the masters of the house, and was fenced in front by rails and a slight iron grating. Here Diane, bereaved of her sons, a sorrowful woman with a half-starved nature in all her youth and

beauty, had spent many long hours praying. She had done all she could for the little sanctuary ; the rich hangings which surrounded the altar were the work of her fingers, the jewelled vessels were her gift. Often her slender figure might have been seen, with little Renée, the only child she had left, running by her side, carrying flowers from the garden to make a sweet freshness in the gloomy chapel, where the lamp ever burning showed the one home that her lonely spirit knew.

The Marquis de Montaigle was neither irreligious nor unkind ; his wife's devotion was never interfered with by him, and he and his servants attended Mass regularly. The old Curé's opinion of his eccentric patron was better than that of the rest of the world, but even he did not venture to ask Monsieur le Marquis to spend money on re-paving the chapel floor.

Quiet had descended on the château that evening, the funeral guests being gone. Monsieur and Madame de Saint-Gervais, having retired to their own rooms, were rejoicing in an excellent piece of news they had heard—that the Abbess of Fontevrault had ordered her coach for an early hour the next morning. Their hearts would not have been quite so light had they known that the Abbess had sent to ask for a private interview with the Marquis de Montaigle, and that at this very time he was receiving her in the library. Still, if all had gone smoothly at Montaigle that evening, their confidence in the

future might have suffered no disturbance. But the cleverest people often forget to allow for the unexpected.

Another departure had been fixed for the next day. The Chevalier d'Aumont was to ride off to join his regiment, quartered at Angers. He was to start before dawn, so as to present himself to his commanding officer in good time that day. To Nicolas, though a spirited boy and a soldier at heart, and in spite of months of longing for the end of his sufficiently strict training at Montaigle, this parting was worse than any schoolboy's first going to school. He had loved the gentle woman who had treated him as kindly as she dared—for Monsieur de Montaigle allowed his young page few indulgences. He had followed his guardian at the funeral with a white face and a choking pain in his throat. He had often heard Jean de Vassy boasting coarsely among the servants of what he would do when he was master of Montaigle; and Nicolas was old enough to find it a very terrible thought that this thick-skinned braggart might one day be master of his dear little playfellow too.

Neither Jean nor his parents would have quite cared to see Nico and Renée clinging together in one arm-chair, through those evening hours after the funeral, crying sometimes together, then comforting each other, the dark and fair curls mingled as the boy pressed his cheek against the little head that nestled on his shoulder.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry, Nico!” whispered the child. “Mamma said I was to go with my aunt De Rochechouart—you heard her say it. And I shall love her, won’t you? she is so beautiful and so kind. And Agathe says that Angers is not a long way from the Abbey where she lives—you must come and see me, darling——”

“Ah, mon Dieu! if all that happens, so much the better!” sighed the boy. “If only Monsieur your father will let you go with Madame l’Abbesse; yes, then indeed—yet I don’t know——”

He stopped and sighed. Young as he was, he could quite understand the gulf that would widen every year between himself and Renée.

Agathe, who had been watching for some time from the high window towards the village, now slipped quietly out of the room. As she went she looked back at them.

“They are safe together, our little lovers,” she said to herself. “What a pity Monsieur Nico is not somebody else! But even if somebody else was out of the world, I suppose it would make things no better.”

In all Montaigle the Marquise Diane left no heart more lonely, more uncomforted, than that of her poor dwarf, her singing-bird, l’Oiselet. A little of a poet and a musician too, the boy with his loving heart had a mind above his station. The Marquise had spoilt him, people said; he was constantly lying at her feet while she worked at her embroidery frame, sometimes

buried in some book of old romance, sometimes talking on subjects he knew nothing about. At other times he was singing to the guitar, either quaint little songs of his own making, or scraps that he had picked up of the fashionable music of the day. Or he was mending Mademoiselle Renée's few toys, or inventing games for her, or telling her stories; he had been her playfellow from her birth in a much more domestic fashion than Nico d'Aumont, who was more sternly brought up as page to the Marquis. But l'Oiselet, delicate, sensitive, and emotional, feeling his physical inferiority more keenly than any one but the Marquise knew, was by no means effeminate. He loved to escape sometimes into the forest, and his apparent fear of its terrors was merely play. At heart he was as brave as any forester or huntsman of them all; and no one knew this better than his most loyal friends and fellow-servants, old Guillaume and his sons.

In these sad days l'Oiselet was heartbroken. Nobody seemed to want him, for Agathe now devoted herself entirely to her little mistress, besides which Monsieur Nico, with no lessons and no outdoor exercises, was able to spend more time than usual with Renée; and she made no secret of preferring him to any other companion, even the most obediently devoted. The dwarf was her slave, with wonderful arts of amusing, but the tall Nico was her true knight.

So l'Oiselet stole away alone. While the Marquise lay in state, his pathetic form and face were often seen by the nuns, passing in and out, half hidden in a corner of the great dim room. More than once the kind-hearted Abbess would have spoken to him, but he slipped out of her way. He did not know that his dying mistress had commended him to her care; and he, with the rest of the household, dared hardly hope that she would be able to carry off Mademoiselle Renée in spite of the Saint-Gervais. More eyes than those of Madame la Comtesse had watched the long conference between the two cousins on the terrace, and the servants had drawn their own conclusions. Their master was a hard man; he had never taken much trouble to please his wife in her lifetime; why, then, should he begin now? As to her last words, the Comte de Saint-Gervais had been seen to laugh at them: might not the Marquis de Montaigle do the same in his heart? He had often been heard to scoff at peasant superstitions, and once, when there was a ghost in the churchyard, he had openly suggested that it was a trick to frighten the villagers, and had said to the Curé, "My good friend, you do not expect me to believe that one of your parishioners has returned from the other world on purpose to plague his neighbours?"

But the servants and the peasants all believed that the Marquise would keep her word, and a good many of them declared, as soon as the

funeral was over, that no power would make them venture into the chapel except in broad daylight. Even if the dear lady had her will, and the Saint-Gervais scheme was defeated, they thought that anxiety for her little daughter would not let her rest in her grave.

In the dusk of that evening, however, one lonely little figure crept limping down under the shadowy walls, and let itself in at the low chapel doorway. Inside, it was nearly dark—only a glimmer of daylight shone in at the narrow windows, darkened as they were by the trees of the garden; black and silver hangings added to the gloom, but the lamp before the altar shone with its own soft veiled light straight down on the long slab of white stone, deeply cut with the Montaigle coat of arms, which had been raised and let down again that day.

L'Oiselet knelt for a few minutes at the foot of the stone in front of the altar, then he lay down on the ground and pressed his cheek to the cold stone, and the grief with which his heart was swelled and aching had its sway; he lay there sobbing, and the stone was wet with his tears. L'Oiselet had no fear of his mistress, living or dead. She would always be the same to him: a saint on earth or a saint in Paradise. It was better to be here, near what was left of her, than anywhere else in the cold empty château. The boy cried his heart out, and then lay still, face downwards, on the stone that covered her. The clock high up in the tower

struck more than once while he lay there, and the distant chime of the church clock answered it; daylight died away from the windows, and the lamp shone alone, its calm radiance falling on his tumbled yellow curls and the short black cloak that hid his crooked figure.

Poor l'Oiselet! He found that it was good to be there. In the chapel his desolate little soul was not alone, and when the first violence of his grief had passed away, there stole over him a feeling of strange incredible peace and security, a feeling of being sheltered under an angel's wing, "safe under his feathers." He had never known such peace through his light-hearted, romantic life, not even in the moments when his lady's hand rested on his hair and she smiled her pleasure at some new sparkle of poetic fancy. This was like a blessed dream. L'Oiselet lay very still that he might not wake from it. The sad past, the doubtful future, all was forgotten in the mysterious repose of the present.

But it did not last long. L'Oiselet had fallen asleep in Paradise only to wake in hell—so indeed he thought in his first bewildered horror. The chapel door groaned on its hinges while it was pushed slowly open, then with two strides across the floor a man with a heavy stick in his hand stood over the crippled lad as he lay.

L'Oiselet started, lifting his head, but the face that bent above him was in shadow. He only heard quick breathing for an instant, as if of

some fierce animal; then he was seized by the collar, dragged to his knees, and beaten with cruel barbarous blows that made his poor little body a mass of bruises from head to feet. At the first moment l'Oiselet cried out, then he bit his lips and struggled silently; but struggling was of no use whatever under the strong hand that held him down.

For a moment the crashing blows ceased, and a voice hissed in his ear, "Do you know why you are beaten, miserable little worm? To teach you not to carry secret messages." Then the stick descended again with force enough to break the boy's bones, and the thought "Monsieur Jean" seemed to flash like fire across his brain. After that he knew no more, for he fainted from the awful pain.

For a minute or two the cruel beating went on, though the victim lay like dead beneath the blows, till it occurred to Jean de Vassy's half-brutal mind that after all he had better not kill the boy. He only meant to punish him well and frighten him effectually. He had hardly cried at all, and now he had ceased to struggle. He could not be dead; it must be pretence; and he kicked him in the side to rouse him.

"Get up, you fool," he growled, "and don't lie there like a dead pig. Get up, or I'll begin again."

Where now was the sheltering angel's wing? The sacred lamp shone on as calmly as before, but it seemed indeed as if in losing his mistress

the poor dwarf had lost his only friend in this world or any other.

Then as Jean de Vassy hesitated a moment, looking down on the helpless heap at his feet, his stick half lifted for another rain of blows, a voice that seemed to come from the roof, clear yet trembling, cried out suddenly :

“ Who is this wicked man who commits violence in the house of God ? ”

At first the young man was afraid to move : he stood like a statue over his victim, breathless with terror. Then, lifting his head and staring wildly round, he saw in the tribune of the chapel a tall figure, shadowy and pale in the darkness, and waiting to see and hear no more, he dropped his stick and rushed headlong towards the doorway. As he plunged out into the dim courtyard, somebody else, much taller and of still more solid proportions, stepped forward from the shelter of the trees, and tripped him up by the simple expedient of stretching a long leg in his way. Jean tumbled so violently on his face that he was stunned for a few minutes, and lay like a log where he fell. A woman's voice, half frightened, half triumphant, broke out of the deep shade of the chestnut into which Jean's interceptor had hastily stepped back on seeing him fall.

“ Mon Dieu ! Joli-gars, what have you done ? It is Monsieur le Vicomte. You surely have not killed him ? ”

“ I am afraid not, ma'mselle. Only spoilt his

pretty face. I know what it is, for Ga'cogne once threw me down with the same trick on these stones, and I thought my nose was broken. Then you would never have looked at me. One kiss, ma'mselle, for tripping up Monsieur Jean!"

"Go away, impertinent. Let us go into the chapel, for there certainly was a very strange noise, and I should like to see if that gentleman has done any mischief."

"Into the chapel! At this hour! Oh no, ma'mselle!" exclaimed Joli-gars, hastily crossing himself.

"You are afraid? Of what, pray?" said Agathe scornfully; and pushing her admirer to one side, she walked towards the door, not without a nervous glance at the figure stretched on the stones. "Let us hope none of their people will come by," she murmured. "If he does not get up and run away, you had better disappear as quickly as possible, my friend."

"I will keep an eye on him," Joli-gars answered. "But, ma'mselle, ma'mselle, why do you want to go into the chapel? Shall I fetch a light at least? I am afraid of nothing earthly, as you well know—but they say—well, she is gone, so I must follow her."

Once inside the chapel door, Agathe stretched her hand to the holy water and crossed herself devoutly, while she gazed in horror, at first quite uncomprehending, at the strange silent group above the very place where her mistress had

been laid that morning. Two nuns were kneeling, one on each side of the prostrate, helpless l'Oiselet, who was beginning to groan faintly as they tried to lift him. One of them—it was the Mère de la Mothaye—looked round with something like a start of terror when Agathe came in.

“I hope this is a good Christian,” she said, her voice trembling, “and no friend of the heathen savage who—ah, surely it is Madame de Montaigle’s waiting-woman?”

“Yes, surely, madame, it is Agathe. But what has happened, in heaven’s name! Why, it is l'Oiselet—poor little fellow——”

“He has been most cruelly ill-treated,” said the Mère de la Mothaye, and tears of pity ran down her face. “I only wish the reverend Mother and I had been here sooner. We came to pray by the dear Marquise’s grave—God rest her soul! but if she is still anywhere near earth, she is not happy at this moment, for I believe this poor boy was one of her most faithful servants. No sooner had we opened the door into the gallery than we heard the savage sound of blows, and by the light of the lamp we could see that a man was striking what looked like a helpless child at his feet. We were terribly shocked, and at the first moment I thought of going back into the château and giving the alarm, for I feared that the monster might turn his violence upon us. However, I saw immediately that there was no time to be lost if we

were to save the child's life. So I spoke, and the villain instantly fled. Then we descended into the chapel, and saw at once that it was the poor dwarf—with broken bones, I fear. Who can have been brutal enough to misuse him so cruelly?"

"There is only one person, madame," answered Agathe, looking up into the good nun's face, as she too knelt beside the boy. "Everyone in the château and in all the country round loves l'Oiselet, and it is only a stranger who would hurt him. It was Monsieur le Vicomte, madame—they tell us he is to marry Mademoiselle Renée. Madame la Marquise knew his character, and therefore she said——"

"Oh, my good girl, impossible," cried Mother de la Mothaye, with some stateliness. "No gentleman would be found belabouring a poor helpless servant-boy with a great cudgel. I am convinced that you are mistaken."

"Ah! and here is the cudgel, to be sure!" exclaimed Agathe, scrambling to her feet and picking it up. "Yes, it belongs to Monsieur Jean; he has broken dogs' bones with it before now."

She put it carefully aside in a corner, then went to the door and peeped out into the darkness. "Joli-gars!" she called in a low voice. "Here you are! Come in! I will have the child carried to Monsieur le Marquis. Even if it makes no difference, he shall know how Monsieur Jean amuses himself. In the chapel,

over madame's very grave—her favourite servant—even I could not have believed in such fiendishness. But I am not afraid of the brute—and everyone in the place shall hear this story. Your father and brothers are not gone home yet; we must call them, and then—tiens! Joli-gars—take care how you touch him, my boy.”

Joli-gars shrugged his shoulders as if the warning was hardly necessary, but he soon found that the task of lifting the boy was by no means an easy one. Still half unconscious, l'Oiselet cried and shrieked with pain as soon as Joli-gars attempted to move him: and the young man muttered remarks to Monsieur Jean's intention which were neither very fit for the chapel nor for the ears of the nuns. At last, however, the suffering little frame of l'Oiselet was cradled with tolerable ease in the strong forester's arms, and his groans were checked by a whisper in his ear:

“Courage, little fellow! bear it like a man. If you make such a noise, mademoiselle will hear you.”

Joli-gars stepped out with his burden into the courtyard, Agathe following. She looked anxiously for the prostrate form of Monsieur Jean, but found to her great relief that he had vanished.

The two nuns remained praying in the chapel. The Mère de la Mothaye felt herself torn between rival duties. It seemed impossible to leave the house of God, the resting-place of the

dead, unguarded and exposed to the sacrilegious violence of men. Yet as a faithful chapelaine she was not happy in being away from her Abbess even for an hour within these unhallowed walls of the Château de Montaigle. Truly the world outside Fontevrault seemed to her "full of darkness and cruel habitations."

CHAPTER VII

AN INTERVIEW

THE Marquis de Montaigle's library was a small high room in the northern tower, with two narrow windows which let in little daylight. It looked rather less dismal and dilapidated than the other parts of the château, partly because of the books which covered two walls in stately files, chiefly folio and quarto, partly because it was also the usual abode of the master himself. Here he had his great leathern chair and his table, on which a huge brass-bound box held the business papers of the estate—for Monsieur de Montaigle did not trust even his steward very far. An immense bunch of keys hung under the high projecting chimney-piece, which was handsomely carved in white stone. The rest of the room was hung with dark old tapestry, and in the corner to the left of the fireplace a separate piece of this concealed a very narrow door.

To-night a log was smouldering on a heap of grey ashes under the wide black chimney. A fire in October was an unusual luxury for the hardy

Marquis, but the evening was cold, and the dreariness of that whole week had crept into his bones. He looked an old and shrivelled man, much too small for his chair, as he sat with thin hands pressed together and with keen, tired, troubled eyes fixed on his companion.

All the proper compliments and condolences had been expressed in the best language by Madame de Fontevrault, and Monsieur de Montaigne with the same formality had thanked her for the kindness and attention she had shown to him and his in this time of trouble, and had politely regretted that her visit must end the next day. To an ordinary person it might have seemed difficult to escape from this atmosphere of unreality and good manners, and the Marquis, perhaps, would have been glad to remain in it. He was, in fact, clearing his throat to make an announcement which would spoil any visions this lady might have of the future, and would show her that to curtsy and retire gracefully was both in reason and in politeness the only thing to do. The Abbess, however, during a moment of silence and hesitation on his part, raised her dark eyes and considered him with that *regard velouté* which had conquered so many opposing spirits. It checked the words upon his lips, and she spoke first after all, raising an argument which he had for a moment hoped to escape. Not that anything the Abbess might say was likely to change his long and carefully formed intention, but the whole subject

was painful, and any discussion of it could not ail to be awkward and unpleasant for him.

“Yes, I must return home to-morrow,” said Madame de Fontevrault. “And so the question arises, dear cousin, of your little daughter Renée. But I need hardly ask, for I know your respect for your wife, and I cannot doubt that her dying wish is almost as strong in your eyes as a command from heaven. Yes—as to that I want no assurance. Shall I then carry Renée away with me to-morrow, or will you send her to me later?”

There could be no mistake as to Madame de Fontevrault’s sincerity. The Marquis felt it, being an honest man, in spite of words and hints with which Saint-Gervais had tried to poison him. Her trust in Diane’s husband was real, not feigned, and he, feeling this, had some difficulty in answering her.

“There are things, madame—there are considerations—” he began slowly.

“Ah, how well I understand all that!” said Madame Gabrielle. “I know it is a hard thing to ask of you. I can well imagine, for instance, the loneliness of this great house—but, cousin, it seems to me that parents are called by God to be the most unselfish beings in His creation. If you think of it seriously, my friend—no doubt you do—you must see that our poor little Renée cannot very well remain here without her mother. She must be educated—and where better than at Fontevrault? She must be cared for as she grows into a woman, and by whom more ten-

derly than her mother's old friend? But you know all this; why should I remind you of it? And then Fontevrault is not very far off. As often as you will visit your little daughter I shall gladly receive you. You will see her grow up a good, happy, accomplished woman, among companions of her own rank. And as to her future life—well, you acknowledge that so far at least you will be repaid for your sacrifice."

"Her future life: there is the difficulty," said the Marquis gravely. "If, madame, I were so far to give way to my poor wife's dying fancy as to entrust my daughter's education to you, what guarantee should I have for the future?"

Madame de Fontevrault gazed at him for a moment before she spoke.

"Explain yourself, if you please."

"Yes, madame. We must understand each other, and the sooner the better."

"A girl's own family naturally disposes of her future. That would be your affair," said Madame de Fontevrault, as he did not seem ready with his explanation.

She was inclined for the moment to believe that his old prejudice against the Mortemarts, his old dread of Versailles, was the real obstacle standing in the way. He was certainly a tiresome man, dull, obstinate, hard to convince, and even to understand. Could it be possible that Diane's words had not influenced him so strongly after all? And on the very day of her burial could he call her solemn injunction a fancy!

It was perhaps to give himself a few moments for reflection that he rose from his chair, took the poker and made an attack on the great log in the fireplace. The cheerful flames that instantly began to crackle up the chimney seemed to help and encourage him. He turned round and began to speak, standing on that side of the chimney-piece nearest the Abbess's chair.

"Madame, in our first talk after you arrived here, you said to me that duty leads each of us in a different path. Do you remember?"

"I remember," said the Abbess, bowing her head, while she flushed slightly.

"It is Versailles," she thought to herself. "And after all, if the worthy man only knew it, there is not much to fear now. Things have changed—for good or evil, who can say—good, as to the soul of my poor Athénais! However, let us listen."

"Your duty," the Marquis went on—"that is to say, the interests of your community——"

He half paused and looked at her. She bent her head again, thinking—"Other things too, but it is not necessary to enter into that."

"Well, you gave me to understand that duty led you to Versailles, and kept you there for months at a time, in an atmosphere from which your moral sense revolted."

"And what is that to you, my excellent friend, and how does it affect your little daughter?" thought the Abbess, but she only bowed once more.

"Your duty, madame, is to your community. Mine is to my family."

"That is undeniable, cousin."

A smile trembled round Madame Gabrielle's pretty mouth.

"My poor Diane!" she thought for the hundredth time. "Was your husband in the habit of boring you with truisms like this!"

"When I say 'my family,' I mean the house of Montaigle. It depends on me to consolidate the house, and to make it a real power in France. I have two other estates as large as this, madame. I have family documents dating from the earliest ages; I have heirlooms which almost equal the crown jewels of France in value. These are not only great possessions, Madame l'Abbesse, they are great responsibilities."

The Marquis spoke without ostentation, and with his eyes fixed on the ground. He had indeed almost the air of being ashamed of what he was saying, and it seemed as if he must feel the strange incongruity of his plain and shabby little self with the riches and importance that belonged to him.

"My three sons died," he went on in the same dry, quiet tone. "I am left with no one but a daughter to inherit all this. In times like these, greedy, heartless, avaricious, could I leave her to be the prize of any fortune-hunter who might succeed in forcing himself into the family? On the contrary, my last son was no sooner dead

than I began to consider my daughter's future. The younger branch of my family is equally distinguished with the elder, though not so rich. The only son of my cousin Saint-Gervais, marrying my daughter, might naturally obtain my succession as Marquis de Montaigle. Becoming head of the family, he would appear to be the just heir to all its possessions. Could I fail, in this case, to see where lay my duty?"

"And do you carry the parallel still further between your duty and mine?" said the Abbess gravely and gently. "Is this arrangement one from which your moral sense revolts? Yes, cousin—or why should your wife, so good and dutiful, so submissive to you, so faithful to your interests, have forbidden this marriage with her last breath?"

Monsieur de Montaigle paced once or twice up and down the room, while the Abbess's eyes followed him musingly. At last he stopped again in front of her.

"The affairs of this world," he said, "should be managed by men and not by women. In such matters men are not guided by personal fancy. Suppose the kings of France, for instance, depended for their succession on the humours and prejudices of a group of women—I like him, I do not like him; he is handsome, he is ugly! How could the State continue at all under such guidance? In fact, its founders felt this so strongly that they made the Salic Law."

"The founder of my Abbey of Fontevrault

was of a different opinion. However—you mean that your wife was guided by prejudice and personal fancy, and that she said of your future son-in-law and successor, ‘I do not like him. He is ugly!’ ”

“Your poor cousin was a fanciful person, madame,” said the Marquis, but he turned his face away to hide the involuntary shadow of a smile.

“Possibly—but she was not an unreasonable person. She asked no more from life than it gave her. I repeat that she was dutiful, submissive and faithful, and that your interests and those of your house were dear to her. Still it may well be that the happiness of her child was dearer still—and, to tell you the truth, cousin, though I have only seen Monsieur de Vassy at a distance, and have not spoken to him, I think he is a bad and cruel-looking young man. Stupid too—the qualities often go together. If I were you, I should hesitate before placing my estates and heirlooms in the hands of Monsieur de Vassy, to say nothing of my daughter.”

“Romance—romance! It is a family arrangement. Jean is a rough diamond, I grant you, but life will polish him. The marriage cannot take place for years yet.”

“So much the better,” murmured Madame de Fontevrault. “If he is a diamond—but never did I meet with a precious stone that looked so like a lump of mud.—Your sense of duty is indeed all-powerful,” she said aloud—“and I

can well understand that your moral sense revolts from such a family arrangement."

Monsieur de Montaigle glanced at her uneasily.

"Madame, the expression is too strong," he said. "Jean de Vassy may not be all that you or I could wish—and he had the misfortune not to please my wife—but he is a gentleman, and I have never known him do anything unworthy of the name he bears. Were he a worse boor than he is—there he stands, without our choosing, the last hope of the house of Montaigle, and I at least, therefore, feel bound to accept him. I will not deny that my wife's words shook me a little—a man is weak at such moments—but I should despise myself if they had power to change my deliberate intention."

"And you will not even give me the care of the child while she is young? That was Diane's most earnest wish. That was why she sent for me, to commend her child for my protection."

"She sent for you!" said the Marquis quickly. "I thought you had heard of her illness by chance."

"I allowed you to think so, cousin, because I did not then know you as I do now. I see now that you are a generous man, that you loved your wife, and would not have grudged any comfort that might reach her during those last hours."

"You do me justice, madame. But Diane

knew me—why did she not ask me to send for you? God knows I should not have refused her.”

“To tell you the whole truth, she feared that the intrigues of others might step in—that if a messenger was known to be going from you to me he might never reach me.”

“It is possible,” said the Marquis, beginning again to pace the room. “Your coach-wheels were not a welcome sound to all ears. For instance, you arrived in time to stop the writing out and signing of a formal promise of betrothal, on which my cousins Saint-Gervais had set their hearts.”

“And that formal promise is not yet made?”

“No. I am not very sorry for that. I think Renée is too young. My intention is promise enough, and so I have since told Saint-Gervais.”

“You are perfectly right. But—to return to my question—will you not so far grant your wife’s dying request as to entrust the child to my care, at least for the present?”

“No, madame,” he answered, in grave, decided tones. “Personally, I beg you to believe, I have the fullest confidence in you—but Madame de Saint-Gervais has her own strong views on the education of young girls, and it is the subject—as you may have heard—which preoccupies her friend, the Marquise de Maintenon.”

“Ah! voyons,” said the Abbess, with a slight laugh, “then our poor little Renée is to go to Versailles after all!”

"I have heard it said that there are two Versailles," replied the Marquis, drily.

After this there was a silence of several minutes, only broken by the crackling of the fire. Any other woman but Gabrielle de Rochechouart might very well have considered herself defeated, and could have retired gracefully with a good conscience, feeling that she had done her best, if in vain, for Diane and Diane's child. And perhaps Monsieur de Montaigne wondered what more the reverend lady could have to say to him. He showed no impatience, however, but sat down quietly and folded his thin hands together, a dismal figure enough in the dimly-lighted room.

"You are not alarmed, then," said Madame de Fontevrault suddenly, "when you think of Diane's last words? You are not afraid to draw down the malediction of that pure soul upon your house? You can bear the thought of her showing herself to you, as the visible guardian of her child?"

"Madame, I am not superstitious, but neither am I irreligious. If I see my duty, and do it honestly, I do not believe that any such fears need trouble me. I cannot think that disembodied spirits are allowed to torment us unreasonably."

"*Unreasonably!* perhaps not," the Abbess murmured in reply. To her, who had received Diane's last sigh, the difficulty was to realise her absence, not her presence. Could all that

passionate love, that deep anxiety, be quenched in a moment when the soul was freed from the body? It was indeed a matter for musing.

But such reflections, not having the nature of a practical argument, would evidently be quite thrown away on the dry philosopher sitting there. Neither could the Abbess resolve, though the idea flashed across her mind, to tell him that in her view pious hypocrisy might end in making a worse Versailles than the other. For the moment she really felt defeated on all sides. But yet she did not rise and go. She sat still in her chair, tapping gently with her fingers on the table close by. Vaguely she felt that there was something in gaining time, something in keeping Renée's father for a few extra minutes away from the Saint-Gervais relations.

The Marquis was the first to move or speak. He got up suddenly, as if he could restrain himself no longer. With a shrug and a grim smile, flourishing his hands with the air of dismissing a tiresome subject, he bowed to the Abbess and said, "If I cannot oblige you in this matter, madame, may I hope that we shall continue the friendship begun at such a painful time? You will treat me for the future as a cousin, and you will find me sincerely at your service, and at that of your community."

The Abbess thanked him graciously. These, after all, were concessions from such a person, and it would not be in Renée's interest to quarrel with her father.

"Rely on my constant good-will, my dear cousin," she said. "I shall recommend you and your child to the prayers of the best among us. You will not find that an injury, I think."

"On the contrary, madame," he assured her.

She was in the act of rising to take leave of him, when with a slight hesitation he begged her to remain a few moments longer.

"I have something to show you," he said.

She was only too glad, and watched him with interest as he took a small key from a chain, unlocked the box upon the table, took out a larger key, lifted the tapestry which curtained the narrow door by the fireplace, and unlocked it. Inside there was a smaller door of iron, which he opened with a key hidden inside the first door. The shelves of a high narrow cupboard were loaded with boxes, some of steel, some of leather. The Marquis lifted one small box down, and set it on the table. He then lighted six candles in two gilt candlesticks, unlocked the box, and took out from among a number of rings one, at sight of which the Abbess's eyes brightened and her cheeks reddened a little. It was a very beautiful sapphire, set in large diamonds, which flashed wonderfully. At the back of the stone was a little gold box that opened, containing a scrap of dark hair: on the lid of this the initials D.G. were traced in the tiniest brilliants.

"You have seen it before?" said Monsieur de

Montaigle, with a keen glance: then leaning forward he laid the ring on the Abbess's palm.

"Certainly," she said. "It is the ring that my mother gave Diane at her marriage. I saw it then. You will give it to Renée when—she is old enough?"

"Non, ma cousine," said the Marquis gently. "I give it to you."

"I cannot accept it," said Madame Gabrielle. "No! I would accept Renée herself, but not a jewel that ought to be hers. Put it back, I beg!—I insist!" she added, as he made no movement to take it.

He looked at her gravely and shook his head. "It is your mother's ring," he said—"a family ring of your own. I think you have more right to it than we Montaigles."

"It is not a Mortemart jewel," said the Abbess. "The initials are my mother's own and Diane's. It goes naturally to Diane's child."

"Diane never wore it," he said wearily. "She hated jewels. Most of her own, after the death of the children, she caused to be set in sacred vessels for the chapel. Some indeed she sold, to endow her hospital for the sick poor. All this with my consent. There could be no daughters-in-law to be decked out, and as for the little girl"—he waved his hand towards the open cupboard—"no heiress in France has more magnificent jewels than lie waiting for her there. Most of them are heirlooms. As I have explained

to you, they will remain without question in the family."

The Abbess bent her head with a touch of impatience.

"Yes; I have heard of the treasures of Montaigne," she said. "Let us hope they may always be in worthy hands. As to this ring——"

"Do me the favour of keeping it, at least for the present. Some day, if you choose, you can give it yourself to Renée."

The Abbess looked at the ring as it lay flashing on her hand in the yellow candle-light, and suddenly changed her mind, as it seemed.

"Well, cousin, I will keep it. And Renée shall have it some day. She shall have it when she makes a marriage to please her mother—peace be with her—and me."

A curious suspicious glance darted across from the Marquis's sunken eyes.

"You know that cannot be," he said, almost roughly.

"Then I will keep the ring among my own treasures at Fontevault for the sake of my mother and of Diane."

"You are not very like Madame la Duchesse de Mortemart"

"No; her nieces were more like her than her own children. I was more difficult to manage than our poor Diane. We were true Mortemarts."

She sighed, then smiled, and lifted her beautiful dark eyes to the withered visage op-

posite. "Your little Renée has no Mortemart blood, it is true——"

The Marquis shrugged his shoulders, and muttered an ungracious word of thanksgiving.

"But if her face tells true, she is not of the submissive nature of her mother and grandmother. I think it is a character that may be led, but never driven. And I know something of young girls, cousin, though I may not have the great experience of Madame de Maintenon, and may detest, as I do, her system of education."

"I am ignorant on these subjects," said Monsieur de Montaigle, in his driest tones. "I only know that my daughter will understand her duty to her family, and will do it."

"I congratulate you," said the Abbess, with a slightly satirical smile.

She was again rising to take her leave, when he, attracted in spite of himself by this woman of a hated and dreaded race, and sorry in the queer twists of his mind for continued opposition, though necessary, and occasional rudeness of plain-speaking such as she, in those courteous times, had probably never met with before, asked her to remain yet a few minutes. She smiled and remained, still ready, for Diane's sake, to conciliate him.

He then turned again to his cupboard of treasures, lifted down box after box from its deep shelves, set them on the table before her and opened them one after another, till the whole far-famed treasure of Montaigle lay spread

beneath her eyes. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, pearls, gifts of kings and queens and princes in centuries long gone by. The chains of great pearls which one ancestor had brought from the East, the diamond coronet and necklace and long ear-rings which the wife of the head of the house had always worn at Court. Rings by hundreds, heavy bracelets like fetters of wrought gold and precious stones. Jewelled snuff-boxes, of more modern fashion, but found by their present possessor far too gorgeous to be used, with many magnificent trifles that a great lady would naturally have scattered about her rooms, but which the last Marquise had willingly seen buried in darkness.

Sadness gathered on Madame Gabrielle's face as she watched old Mathieu de Montaigle among his family treasures. To a mind like hers, the religious, the student of Plato, all this was trash, and worse than trash, when one considered its value. To keep all this in the Montaigle family a girl's life was to be sacrificed. The idea seemed the lowest heathenism. No wonder if the thought of these treasures had been a heavy weight round Diane's neck; no wonder if she had not cared to wear such signs of bondage.

Yet Madame de Fontevrault was very far from despising beautiful things in themselves. One by one she held the beautiful old ornaments in her fingers, heard their story, admired the perfection of the gems, while she noticed with a touch of indulgent scorn their owner's pride in

them. He was no longer the dry stick he had been before. His whole face softened, his eyes shone with enjoyment. It was in a positively triumphant tone that he said at last, waving his hands over the magnificent display in the light of his six wax candles, "You see, madame, the name and the heirlooms are worth preserving together."

She had not had time to answer—and indeed an instant answer was difficult to find—when there came a tramping of feet on the stone stairs outside the door, followed by a heavy, impatient knocking.

CHAPTER VIII

ACCUSATION

THE sudden and unceremonious clatter startled both Monsieur de Montaigle and his guest. Their servants were taught to scratch gently at doors, not to thunder with their fists. With a quick glance at his treasures he cried out "Who is there?"

But this brought no delay. Any answer was enough for those outside; the door flew open, and the four tall foresters tramped into the room, Agathe the waiting-maid hurrying after them. She dived under their great elbows to the front of the group, and pointed with eager fingers to the burden Joli-gars was carrying. It looked like a dead child.

"Mon Dieu! What is that?" cried Madame de Fontevrault, hastily rising.

"Do not disturb yourself," the Marquis said to her. He went on, frowning—"What are you doing here, Guillaume? Is it the custom to burst into my private room without leave? Go away, all of you! I cannot speak to you now."

The four men stood blinking and silent, dazzled

by the candles and the diamonds, overawed for the moment by the stately room, to them indeed an inner sanctuary, by their master's stern voice, by the dignity of Madame de Fontevrault and her black and white draperies. But Agathe came further forward, still pointing to Joli-gars and the boy in his arms.

"Monsieur le Marquis does not see," she said. "There is our excuse—Madame's poor Oiselet, almost beaten to death — and monsieur will never believe *where!*"

"L'Oiselet beaten! who has done this? I warn you all that he shall pay for it," said the Marquis.

For the moment there was real feeling in his voice. He then went forward at once, made Joli-gars lay the boy down on the couch; and then, while Agathe held a candle, he and the Abbess examined the boy's hurts.

L'Oiselet cried and groaned piteously as they moved him, but did not seem able to speak. Old Guillaume stood watching with keen fierce eyes; Joli-gars, flushed and staring, looked both handsomer and more stupid than usual; Grand-Gui was pale under his sunburn, with hands tight clenched and teeth set; it was easy to see that he cared more than any of them for the little fellow's pain; Gars-cogne grinned in the shadow, and his eyes devoured the display on the table.

"He is sore and bruised from head to foot, but I think no bones are broken," the Marquis

said at last. "Take him up, one of you, carry him to his bed, and let Gobert send for Pierrot. And get away with you all. I shall inquire into this later, but you see that I am busy now. I cannot attend to your quarrels and brawls now. Yes, my good Guillaume, I understand that you want the fellow punished, but that must be another day."

"But monsieur—monsieur"—Agathe began, seconded by an angry grunt from the old forester. "There are things—terrible things—that monsieur will hardly believe——"

"I tell you another day," and the Marquis turned his back upon them. "As for you, Agathe, this is not your business. Go back to your young mistress."

"If monsieur would let me speak——"

"I will not let you speak. Be gone—all of you—Madame l'Abbesse, I am sorry you have been disturbed. Sit down again, I beg."

"Do not think of me, if it is right that you should hear what these good people have to say. It may be important," said the Abbess, to whose quick intelligence something in the men's faces, something in Agathe's voice and manner, had already conveyed a suspicion of the truth.

"They are afraid to name the brute who has attacked this helpless child," she said to herself. "And does my cousin Montaigle suspect anything, I wonder? Since the first moment, he has not asked who it was, and he is trying to hush up matters while I am here. Poor foolish man!

But poor little Renée! What shall I do? Still it may not be so—but it is.”

Stern, pale, and preoccupied, Monsieur de Montaigle stood with his back to the rest of the room, staring into the fire. For a moment or two he gave the Abbess no answer. Then he started a little and said, “*Merci!—merci!* It is of no importance.”

Joli-gars, in obedience to a sign from Agathe, now took up his load again. Grand-Gui had stepped forward to lift the child whom he loved, but was checked by his father’s iron grasp on his arm, and a loud whisper—“Let the fool go!” Agathe shrugged her shoulders and made a face at her master’s back, then slipped towards the door, followed by her chosen giant with heavy tread. The other three men stood like rugged trees in their places. From the bent of old Guillaume’s shaggy brows, it might be guessed that their seigneur would not get rid of them so easily.

Before Joli-gars and Agathe, with their charge, had reached the door, they were stopped by a most unexpected arrival. Hardly waiting for a muttered word of announcement from the valet who ran up before them, Monsieur and Madame de Saint-Gervais appeared in the Marquis’s library, and close on them followed Jean de Vassy with his head bound up.

An extraordinary snarl was heard, and at the same time l’Oiselet cried out sharply: his bearer had given him an involuntary squeeze.

The snarl had escaped from the throat of Grand-Gui, silenced by a kick from his father that made him wince and stand on one leg. Monsieur Jean turned crimson as his victim was carried past him in the doorway, and hearty scowls were exchanged by Joli-gars and himself. Agathe turned round, showing her teeth, and beckoned the young man to hurry.

"Don't you see, noodle?" she said to him on the stairs, "they are come to complain of you. He looks a pretty object with his head tied up, the young master! Uglier than ever, I declare."

"He can't swear it was me, ma'mselle; he only saw my leg, if that indeed," said Joli-gars with some anxiety. "And Monsieur le Marquis would take my part if he knew——"

"Ah, but the deuce is in it, he won't let any one tell him! Never mind, if it comes out in time to save Mademoiselle Renée, I shall not trouble myself about *your* big bones. Come along. As soon as the boy is laid in his bed, you shall run and fetch the barber."

"I believe I'd best run away altogether," Joli-gars muttered, as he scrambled obediently downstairs.

Jean de Vassy could not keep himself from staring at the three foresters, who stood there like statues of vengeance. He knew they had come to accuse him. Somebody had certainly thrown him down; probably, he now thought, one of them. He saw it all. He had been watched, though the cowards had not dared to follow him

into the chapel and to stop the boy's punishment. Then a slight shudder came over him at the thought of the figure in the gallery. How tall and white it had been! how hollow its voice! Certainly it was like no other voice he knew, and in his own heart he felt pretty sure that he had seen and heard the buried Marquise. She was keeping her word pretty soon, to be sure. He had said nothing of the apparition to his father or mother. He could not have explained his presence in the chapel; he thought it best not to boast of having beaten l'Oiselet, in case any one should be angry. So he went up to his mother's room with a bleeding head, shaking with terror which he tried to hide, and told his parents that a man had set upon him and knocked him down in the courtyard, without provocation. His father hardly believed him, it was plain; but his mother did; and Monsieur de Saint-Gervais could not refuse to go with her to their cousin, to complain of what had happened.

"Ah, pardon, Mathieu," said the Comte, with graceful carelessness. "Shall we retire? We came to settle a small matter, to make a little remonstrance, a little announcement. But we will leave it all till to-morrow, if you please, and will merely wish you and Madame l'Abbesse good-night. Forgive our intrusion, madame," with a low bow.

The Marquis, however, had already handed Madame de Saint-Gervais to a seat. She looked up at her husband disapprovingly, and said:

"You forget ; to-morrow will not be quite the same."

"I think so," said the Comte, drily. "Our cousin is too much surrounded now."

He threw a half scornful, half curious glance toward the end of the room.

"Forest business which cannot wait, I suppose. Autumn is coming on—the wolves are probably giving trouble."

"True, Monsieur le Comte. We are after a wolf," came in a sudden hoarse growl from the throat of old Guillaume.

There was something fateful, terrible, in the sight of those three as they stood together. Alexandre de Saint-Gervais and his son were both men of a fair height, but they looked puny near the foresters. Struck by the old man's tone, the Comte stared at him for a moment, then laughed slightly.

At the same time the church bells, which had been silent for an hour or two, broke out wild and melancholy into the funeral chime. Ever since the Marquise died the bells had been chiming, and they would go on till forty days were over. Jean de Vassy turned pale and his teeth chattered as the solemn clang, borne by a west wind, seemed to fill the room. The two ladies and the foresters crossed themselves.

After a moment, to the joy of the newcomers, Madame de Fontevrault wished them all good-night. Monsieur de Montaigle took a light from the valet at the door and led her down the first

flight of stairs. Then he kissed her hand and thanked her for her good company.

"I too," she said, "thank you for your patience, and for all you have told me and shown me to-night, and for the trust of this ring. I have ordered my coach for six o'clock to-morrow morning; with your leave, my chaplain will say mass in the chapel at five."

"I shall be there," said the Marquis.

"And one word more, dear cousin. There is something I wish you to remember for my sake—that Renée has a Father in heaven, and that she, as well as everything else that belongs to you, is merely lent to you by Him. To Him you are responsible for that young life and the ways in which you lead it. Remember too, that all your walls and towers, your estates, your jewels and treasures are nothing in eternity. When you lie as Diane lies, when your soul is judged in the high court of heaven, the first question asked will not be—have you taken any means, fair or foul, to perpetuate the name and honours of Montaigle?"

It was not now a woman of the world, even a religious woman; it was more like an angel speaking, and with authority which came from far. Monsieur de Montaigle bowed once more over the white hand with the Abbess's ring.

"Yes, you are right," he said wearily. "But I must do my duty as I see it. We shall be judged by our own conscience and how we have obeyed it. Good-night, madame."

They parted; and slowly, with one or two sighs, the little Marquis climbed back to his library.

There the atmosphere was electric. Since she first came into the room, Madame de Saint-Gervais's eyes and attention had been almost entirely occupied with the display upon the table. Many a time she had thought covetously of the Montaigle treasures, which till now she had never seen. The candles flickered, and a thousand little coloured flames seemed dancing on the black oak table; those clustered diamonds caught her eyes and held them; the sight almost stopped both thought and breath at first. Then there rose a great wonder in her mind. Why were the jewels spread out here, now? It was not like old Mathieu de Montaigle, cautious and miserly. Apparently he had not only shown his heirlooms to Madame de Fontevrault, whom she hated all the more for it, but to a crowd of peasants. She looked up to call her husband's and Jean's attention to the amazing sight, but saw that they had other matters of interest.

Alexandre, who sometimes made it his rôle to try for popularity, had moved with lazy grace a little nearer to the old forester and his sons where they stood waiting. He began with one or two trifling questions, to which Guillaume grunted answers under his shaggy moustache. Then he asked casually:

"By-the-by, is any one hurt? There was a cry as we came in, and one of you carried a

child out of the room. What happened? Who was it?"

He hardly cared for an answer, but some one else was listening for it anxiously, standing there with throbbing head and sulky eyes cast down. He had a moment's suspense, for the old man seemed to reflect before he answered gruffly and suddenly,

"Ask Monsieur Jean."

The Comte was effectually startled from his indifference. He turned round, and his eyes, keen like steel, flashed the question into those that were sullenly raised to meet them. He muttered an oath, half drew his sword and dashed it back, then turned again to the forester and hissed through his teeth, "Villain—you dare! Tell me the name this moment, and without insolence, or——"

"But yes, Monsieur le Comte," said the old peasant, standing like a rock, while Grand-Gui frowned on one side, and Gars-cogne grinned on the other—"It was l'Oiselet the dwarf. A strong man could beat such a little fellow within an inch of his life without much risk to his own bones, you see. But a broken head is better than nothing, and we'll hope there's worse to come."

Gars-cogne, encouraged by his father's fearless speech, muttered something thick and indistinct about "my hands on his throat," but was silenced by a dig in the ribs and, "Hold thy foolish dog's tongue!"

"You are a fine liar, fellow, as well as a fine

woodman," said the Comte more coolly. "You are making up this story to shield your louts of sons. I wager it was one of them who beat the dwarf, probably the same who dared to trip up my son in malicious horse-play. Your master will hear all, and you will be punished, I assure you."

"Ay, sir, my master shall hear all, and more than will please you," said the old man.

The Marquis now came back into the room, and all fell silent as he walked, grave and stooping, to his chair near the fire. Alexandre de Saint-Gervais turned his back on the foresters and sat down near his cousin. Jean looked at his mother; he would have been glad of her advice, but she was very white, and would not even look at him. Anyhow it was cheering that his father, generally so hard upon him, should see fit to take his part now.

Madame de Saint-Gervais began to speak, and made a formal complaint to Monsieur de Montaigle of the conduct of some of his servants, who had made an unprovoked attack on Jean, and injured him seriously.

"Unprovoked?" [repeated the Marquis, looking at Jean.

"Indeed, monsieur, I had done nothing to the fellow. I do not even know who it was."

"Ha! Then how do you expect me to punish him?"

"Surely you will not refuse to make an inquiry?" said Madame de Saint-Gervais.

She glanced impatiently at her husband, just now so energetic, lounging in his chair and watching Jean with those cruel, mocking eyes of his. With her mind and soul full of the diamonds, she had hardly understood the few violent words that had passed between him and old Guillaume; she had hardly realised what else had happened, or what Jean was accused of. But it all dawned upon her, and she turned a little pale, listening to her cousin Montaigle's reply.

"It seems that I hear of nothing but brawls," he said. "A strange time to turn this house into a country fair, with cudgellings and broken heads. Is the same person responsible for all, and who is he?"

He frowned darkly, looking round the room. He seemed to have forgotten that he had ordered the foresters away, and at a motion of his hand, Father Guillaume marched forward to the foot of the table and stood blinking in the candle-light.

"I could make a hit not far from the mark," said Monsieur de Saint-Gervais, half to himself. "Go on, cousin; you are on the track."

"Pardon!" old Mathieu's stern eyes were on him. "Young men are all the better for a few trials of strength, and I do not think much of your Jean's fall. In my young days, it would not have been worth mentioning, but these times are softer."

"If it were a mere fall, I should agree with

you," said the Comte. "But accompanied with malicious threats, and probably the work of a peasant, a *manant*, a big-limbed, blustering village bully——"

He paused, for his cousin was smiling grimly, while old Guillaume's knotted hands could be seen to clench themselves.

"Even in such a case," said the Marquis, "I should hardly have complained to my father and mother. If I had—but this is not profitable. I will not have brawling in my house. I told you, Guillaume, that I would inquire into l'Oiselet's case another day. I have changed my mind. The same unknown man who fought in the dark with Monsieur le Vicomte may have amused himself with beating a child. I believe you came here to accuse some one. Who is it? He shall be punished, and severely."

The faces of the two Saint-Gervais were both turned upon their son; the father's full of scorn and fury, the mother's of half-believing horror. This fool, then, had done his best to ruin their prospects and his own. Whether the Marquis had any suspicions in the right quarter, it was impossible to say. He looked at no one but his old forester, and his face did not change as he waited for an answer. Jean also stood staring at the old man; his eyes very round, his colour changing quickly. He was beginning to see the consequences of having indulged his love of revenge and tyranny.

But Père Guillaume gave the enemy an unex-

pected advantage, for he began to hesitate. Now that his master asked for the story, it was not ready for him. There is no being on earth more *rusé*, more cautious, more self-preserving, than the French peasant. Brute courage these four giants had in plenty; their great strength gave them confidence. But when it came to committing themselves by words, running into danger of an unknown sort, they were wont to tread very carefully. Guillaume knew that he had already accused Monsieur Jean to his face—yes, he would not draw back from that—but he was now busy thinking how to shield Joli-gars, his youngest and really best-beloved, from the future malice of these Saint-Gervais demons, which might work so well through the steward, his enemy. There seemed only one way; a woman's witness would not be so perilous; Ma'mselle Agathe was quite able to take care of herself. As it must never be known that the foot of Joli-gars had been the instrument of Monsieur Jean's trouble, his name must not be mentioned at all in the story.

These considerations gave a certain doubtfulness to the old man's manner when he at last began to speak.

“Monsieur le Marquis—as to accusing, do you see—it was Ma'mselle Agathe's story, but monsieur would not let her speak. As to me and my sons, we were in the stable-yard, preparing to go home after this day—this terrible day—and she fetched us to help her carry the child Oiselet

into the château from the place where she had found him."

"Where was that?"

Grand-Gui's face in the background lengthened into the deepest melancholy. Gars-cogne grinned more broadly than ever.

"Monsieur, the chapel," growled their father from the depths of his great chest. "Ma'mselle Agathe heard a noise in the chapel. She found l'Oiselet half dead on the stone—the very stone—over the very place—ah, mon Dieu!" and his voice died away in a string of muttered imprecations.

The silence then was only broken by the always chiming bells, and Madame de Saint-Gervais turned paler than ever. This sounded like wickedness, sacrilege of an awful kind. Suppose the boy had died! This was far worse than the mad foolhardiness she had at first suspected. And guilt was written on Jean's face. And at that moment Mathieu de Montaigle raised sad stern eyes and looked at him. His voice was odd and changed when he spoke.

"And Agathe saw no one? What became of the wretch? Did he escape?"

"Monsieur, she saw a man running through the darkness."

"It is possible," said Madame de Saint-Gervais suddenly, while she trembled very much, "that this man, crossing the courtyard in his hurry to escape, ran against Jean and knocked him down. Is it possible, Jean?"

Her son answered by an indistinct grunt.

"That does not signify," said the Marquis coolly. "Who was the man, Guillaume?"

"Monsieur, it was already twilight, nearly dark under the trees. How could the woman see him plainly? But she found his stick in the chapel."

"Whose stick?"

"Monsieur le Vicomte's stick—which has broken the bones of half the dogs in the village."

Madame de Saint-Gervais started and cried, "What a lie!"

Her husband's hand flew again to his sword; but he recollected himself, shrugged his shoulders and said gravely, "Cousin Montaigle, do you allow your fellow to make such an accusation against my son—your kinsman—possibly your successor?"

"That never!" snarled old Guillaume, and Grand-Gui echoed his father's words.

The Comte settled himself in his chair with his back to them, and laughed sourly. "On my honour, these men think themselves members of the family, if not masters of the house. To a reasonable person it seems a pity!"

"We are members of the family, Monsieur le Comte," said the old peasant proudly, before his master could speak. "I was the foster-father of Madame la Marquise, and these hands that you see held Mademoiselle Renée at the font. Truly she has no other grandfather. And I say, once for all, that she shall not be married to Monsieur

Jean, against her mother's will. And we will not have one of his sort as our seigneur at Montaigle."

Monsieur de Saint-Gervais laughed again. The sound was followed grimly enough by a wolfish growl from the corner where Gars-cogne stood towering.

"My dear cousin, this old man is surely mad. What he says is all of a piece. Jean is not an angel in goodness, or a girl in gentleness, or a philosopher in wisdom, but he is neither fiend nor fool enough to have maltreated a wretched dwarf and under such circumstances. Plainly, to me, this is a plot to blacken him in your eyes, cousin. You observe that neither these men nor the woman dare say that they saw and recognized him. As for his stick, that may well have been an accident. He may have lost it; it may have been stolen. Was your stick stolen?" suddenly turning on his wretched son. "Yes? I thought so. Then you will be able to deny this preposterous accusation point-blank."

"If he denies it," said old Guillaume, "he will be a liar as well as a coward."

The old fellow's blood was up, and short of exposing Joli-gars to the Saint-Gervais' vengeance he would have said or done anything to prove the case against them. To his mind Jean's stick was evidence enough, and he wondered that it should not seem so to his master. After all, perhaps it did, for since the stick was mentioned Monsieur de Montaigle had held his peace and allowed his cousin to talk.

The old man stretched his long figure and lean neck over the table, resting on both his outspread hands. His fierce eyes gleamed and his grey beard wagged in wrathful agitation. He tried to see if the seigneur was angry with him for his strong language ; perhaps it had been unwise to boast about relationships. The old days, the old claims, might be nothing, now that Madame Diane in her beauty lay cold and dead. But he could not get a clear sight of the small wooden face behind the flickering of candles and flashing of diamonds. For the treasure of Montaigle still lay there, and almost distracted Jean's mother from the question of his guilt or innocence.

The suspense only lasted a moment or two. In dry, even tones the Marquis said, "He cannot be either, Guillaume, being a gentleman and my kinsman. Therefore, if he denies it, I shall believe him."

CHAPTER IX

CONSPIRACY

JEAN denied it. Under his father's threatening glance, seconded by his mother's eyes, entreating, commanding, yet anxious—for, as she afterwards assured herself, nothing but the certainty that all Jean's interests were at stake, and therefore that the end justified the means, could have made her consent to a direct lie—under all this strong influence Jean's confidence rose and flourished.

He had not been near the chapel, or even seen l'Oiselet, since the morning. He was ready to swear, if his cousin Montaigle pleased, but the Marquis cut him off very short, and the look he bestowed on his wounded kinsman was anything but kind. Jean retired quickly into insignificance, and made a hideous grimace as he thought of the interview with his father which was sure to follow.

Nobody troubled themselves to inquire any further as to who had knocked him down. His parents were too wise not to consider that subject closed, at least for the present. Jean had to be contented with his own anticipations of fine

revenges to be had in the future on everybody at Montaigle, and especially on the foresters.

As for them, they were snubbed decidedly enough by the Marquis. He ordered them out of the room without any ceremony, as soon as Jean had spoken his denial. Old Guillaume tried to speak, but was speedily silenced by his master, who waved him to the door, and even old Guillaume was in wholesome awe of his seigneur.

As soon as the clattering feet had descended the first short flight of stairs, he turned with his unchanged manner to Alexandre de Saint-Gervais.

“You had something else to say to me?”

The Comte now wore his pleasantest air, simple, friendly, cousinly. With many regrets they had decided on leaving Montaigle the next day, and had ordered their carriages to be ready about noon for the first stage on the journey to Paris. He himself hoped to visit his dear cousin again shortly, and to be of use to him in the autumn hunts. But at present several important affairs called him and his wife away. And the question was—had Mathieu decided to trust the Comtesse with his precious little daughter?

“If you will be so far troubled?” said Monsieur de Montaigle, bowing to her.

She smiled, triumphant. Really, the queer old creature was not without sense and discretion. She was ready and eager to lay before him all

her proposals for Renée's education, maintenance, management. After chattering for a few minutes, hardly sure that he was listening, she looked at Alexandre and said: "There is one favour we have to ask of you—I am sure my husband will agree with me—that my own women may wait upon the child. You understand—I could not have her mind poisoned against me and mine by that unfortunate Agathe."

The Marquis bowed again. "A very reasonable condition," he said.

He assented in the same mechanical fashion to everything she suggested. As she went on talking he looked occasionally at the clock; then his heavy eyelids drooped again. Jean, impatient, shifted from one foot to the other, and wished he could forget the figure in the gallery. The Comte sat smiling and admiring his fingernails. She, in her element, became happier every moment. The great object of her life seemed really almost gained; and this when poor Jean had done his very best to ruin himself for ever. Even before knowing of his last escapade, she had agreed with her husband that nothing more should be said at present about a formal promise of betrothal. It might seem rather strange, rather heartless, to ask old Mathieu to go so very far against his dying wife's wish. Really, as long as she defeated the Abbess of Fontevrault and carried off Renée in spite of her, she felt that at the moment she could ask no more.

In the meanwhile it was surely permissible to admire the Montaigle diamonds. She truly told the Marquis that their dazzling beauty made it almost impossible to think of anything else.

"Yes, they are fine," he said: but all his pleasure in them seemed to be gone, and it was without any air of interest that he let her and Saint-Gervais examine the jewels and answered their questions.

"What a responsibility!" cried Madame de Saint-Gervais.

"Yes, madame, a great responsibility. These gems, the heirlooms of our house, have their influence on my life, and on the lives of others. In past times people have sinned for them, suffered for them, and all this will be repeated long after I am dead. My stewardship will not be long—God grant it honest!"

He spoke half dreamily, looking on the table. He did not seem to know how willingly these cousins would have relieved him from both stewardship and responsibility.

When their false faces and greedy eyes had at last left him solitary, he set himself to packing away the treasure. When the cupboard was safely locked and the key hidden away, he called the valet who waited on the stairs, and sent him to fetch Agathe.

She came hurrying in some alarm, for the foresters had found her by l'Oiselet's bed, and had given her some rough notion of what had passed. She also now realised how the exciting

events of the evening had made time slip away, so that she had for hours totally neglected her little lady.

She found the library almost dark, for the fire was dying down, and the Marquis had snuffed out all the candles except one, which burned dimly. The shadows were like deep furrows on his worn face as he sat there.

"Come near, Agathe," he said, and she advanced into the small circle of light.

He looked at her steadily, and she felt, like all his servants, how keen those sunken eyes were.

"You had better marry that son of old Guillaume's," he said. "Joli-gars, they call him. I will give you one of my houses in the village."

This was almost too much for Agathe's self-possession. She blushed and stammered—"But—a thousand thanks—but no, monsieur."

"Is he not tall enough for you? Then choose one of the other brothers. I will arrange everything. You shall be rewarded for your long service of—of Madame de Montaigle. Your faithful service, Agathe."

He nodded kindly, with the ghost of a smile.

"Mon Dieu! Monsieur le Marquis is very good, but what would Mademoiselle Renée do without me? I cannot leave her till she is much older, and I could hardly remain her waiting-maid and live in the village. Besides, I do not wish——"

"That is another thing I had to say. Prepare Mademoiselle Renée for a journey to-morrow.

She starts for Paris at noon with Madame de Saint-Gervais in her coach. And the Comtesse has servants enough—she says she will not want you—and I myself hardly require a waiting-maid, Agathe, and so—I think Joli-gars will be better pleased than you seem to be. Charlot is his proper name, I believe. We will drop the foolish nickname when he is married.”

Agathe certainly was not pleased. She was scarlet and furious. She even stamped her foot slightly as she threw up her hands and cried: “Monsieur le Marquis will do such a thing!”

If the master of Montaigle was afraid of anybody or anything, it was of this woman. He admired and trusted her; but he had never liked her influence with his wife, and he had always taken care to keep out of her tongue’s reach when she was angry. His only refuge was in any additional dignity he could call to his aid, and he now flew to it hastily from the more kindly region in which he had proposed Agathe’s marriage.

“I want no more of this,” he said. “Do you not suppose, woman, that I have thought over every argument, and made my decision as it seemed best for my family? I cannot bring up the child here. I do not choose to send her to a convent. I take the most natural course. I entrust her to my cousins, her nearest relations on my own side. Say nothing: I will hear nothing. Your business is to obey my orders, not to preach me a sermon.”

“Ah, voyons!” said Agathe to herself. “I’ll wager he has had the sermon from Madame l’Abbesse. Obstinate pig! After all, she is his own child, and he must send her to the devil if he pleases, I suppose. Let us hope that dear saint may catch her on the way!”

She curtseyed respectfully. “And the betrothal to Monsieur Jean will take place as soon as Mademoiselle is old enough?” she said.

“The future will arrange itself,” he answered, with a wave of the hand.

“Charming!” Agathe muttered. She went on aloud—“Monsieur will be glad to hear that l’Oiselet has opened his eyes and spoken. Pierrot has bled him, and rubbed him with oils; Madame l’Abbesse and the reverend Mothers who were in the chapel have visited him, and have given him a reviving cordial.”

“Ah! I am glad of it,” said the Marquis. Then more words, almost in spite of himself, forced themselves from his lips. “What is the truth in all this romance, Agathe? They tell me that you were the only person who saw the whole affair—that you saw a man running in the darkness, that you found a stick, which had been stolen, it seems, from Monsieur le Vicomte. Who can this man have been? Surely no one in castle or village bore a grudge against that harmless boy.”

Agathe hesitated a moment. “Does Monsieur le Marquis wish me to tell him the truth, or does he prefer lies?”

Her master moved uncomfortably in his chair.
“The whole truth,” he said shortly.

And he heard it.

Agathe was not so cautious as old Father Guillaume, or she trusted the master more. She did not keep her lover's name in the background, but told plainly the part that Joli-gars had taken. She believed that no publicity and no punishment would follow. For herself, she thoroughly enjoyed her story, and the despicable light in which, combined with his own lying denial, it made Monsieur Jean appear.

“And the ladies of Fontevrault,” said the Marquis, after listening in deep, depressed silence to her tale. “You say they came into the chapel. Did they know who it was——”

“They did not recognise him—it was dark—and they refused to believe what I told them.”

“Very well. Enough, Agathe. Go, carry out my orders for to-morrow, and you will find it for your advantage to forget this story.”

Then a slight misgiving troubled Agathe, seeing the sternness in his face.

“I have put Joli-gars in monsieur's hands,” she said. “When he tripped the man up, he did not know——”

“Joli-gars is safe with me.”

“Monsieur, one word!”

The pert, clever, high-spirited woman was kneeling at her master's feet, had caught his thin hand and kissed it.

“For God's sake, for my lady's sake, for

monsieur's own sake—now that he knows Monsieur Jean to be a cruel bully, a coward, a liar——”

“It does not matter what he is,” cried the Marquis impatiently. “Ignorant—you do not understand—he is the only male hope of our house, the last of our name. Besides, Agathe, you foolish woman—I am giving the child in charge to his mother, not to him. And I cannot change now—when I promised, I did not know all this—but yet——”

“Ignorant! None so ignorant as he who won't hear,” cried Agathe.

Tears had been rolling down her face; they seemed suddenly to dry up, and her dark eyes flashed with anger.

“Mon Dieu! this is a man!” she cried aloud. “And little Renée's father! If she had not better friends than her father, she would be unlucky indeed.”

Agathe sprang to her feet and fled. The Marquis cowered in his chair as if the woman had struck him, his face dark red, his hands trembling. Her rage and scorn cut him to the very soul. And of what use was it to be the seigneur of Montaigle, the successor of a line of feudal nobles, the dispenser, through his own paid magistrate, of high and low justice in all the country round, if his own people dared interfere in his affairs as old Guillaume and Agathe did? In these independent days they had no fear of punishment; the castle dungeons gaped uselessly, and had no terror for them. Late into

the night their master sat alone, thinking, beating down certain obstinate doubts, assuring himself that he had no personal horror of Jean de Vassy, no distrust of his parents. And always, in spite of his dying wife, of her wise cousin, of his own faithful servants, he came back to the old refrain : My duty to my family, to my name—that must weigh heavier than a child's, a girl's, a woman's happiness. If Renée is a true Montaigle, as I think, years will find her on her father's side in this matter. Yes, the old middle-age proverb is worth all their modern sentiment—*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra !*

Yet this good conscience was a terrible torment to its owner.

Most of the servants in the great house were snoring by this time. But a very wakeful little conclave sat in l'Oiselet's small chamber. Old Guillaume and his sons had not yet thought it necessary to go back to the forest, and they were free in this matter, for he possessed a key of one of the gates. L'Oiselet had the astonishing luxury of a room to himself, though not much larger than a cupboard. His mistress had put him there, at the foot of her own staircase, where he lay as a sort of watch-dog ; sometimes, when the fancy took him, creeping up to her door and sleeping on the bare bricks outside it. L'Oiselet's musical instruments hung on his wall ; he had a few books, and a bird that he had trained to whistle with him in tune. To this little cell Agathe flew back when she left her master, and

there she found l'Oiselet smiling and talking. He could not move without cruel pain, but his eyes were bright and his spirit brave as ever. Madame de Fontevrault's cordial had done wonders. It had set the active brain working; and now, when Agathe brought the fatal news of what was to happen to-morrow, and the foresters stared blankly, sharing her despair, all their faces presently changed as they drew round l'Oiselet's bed and listened to him. After all, to their minds, it was the command of their dead mistress which had to be obeyed. They saw this with added clearness after the object-lesson that Monsieur Jean had given them that day. But they would have been wildly adrift as to means, Agathe included, without the cunning counsel of the little fellow who lay helpless there.

Madame de Montaigle's rooms had another approach besides this narrow staircase guarded by l'Oiselet. They opened on a wide, brick-paved corridor, with windows in deep recesses, which ran across the wing of the house from the great central staircase. It was in a room next to hers, empty and locked since she had been carried to the state bedroom she was to leave no more in life, that Agathe slept in charge of Mademoiselle Renée. It was here that she had left the boy and girl together that evening when she slipped downstairs for a little flirtation by way of refreshment after the funeral. But with all her trust in Monsieur Nico, she certainly had not meant to leave them for several hours.

Nico did not mind. It was better to be with Renée than anywhere else in the dreary house ; he was only too glad to spend his last evening with her. As dusk came on, which it did very quickly, he lighted the lamp on the table, and wondered why Agathe did not come. Then he settled down once more in the armchair with his little friend, and told her stories to make the time pass ; not nearly such clever and amusing stories as her other slave, the dwarf, knew how to tell ; but with Nico Renée was never critical. She liked Greek and Roman history, battles, sieges, single combats, the result of Nico's studies, told in a slow and unimaginative manner, better than the wildest legends of fairy-land. With the help of these stories, her bedtime being long passed, she presently went to sleep on Nico's shoulder. The small head, the delicate face with its dark bright colouring, rested comfortably on his soft velvet jacket. At first the boy sat in a rather cramped attitude, afraid to move lest he should wake Renée, wistfully watching the breaths that grew more even, the long black lashes still damp with the tears he had dried not long ago. Presently, as the night deepened, and Agathe still delayed her coming, he began himself to feel terribly sleepy. He slipped his arm more securely round the child, and leaned his head back against the hard corner of the chair.

So both these young creatures slept ; and Nicolas d'Aumont, at least, had his dreams. He

never felt quite sure whether they were dreams or realities ; he was inclined in the end to suppose that the things might actually have happened ; in any case, he saw and heard them through a thick veil of sleep.

Two nuns were standing in the room, quite close to him and Renée. One said—"But, Madame, shall I wake them?"

"No," said the other—"I think that my cousin Diane would have left them sleeping. I only desired to see that the poor child was safe so far. "Ah, ma mère, que c'est joli!" with a sigh.

And Nico knew that it was the Abbess of Fontevrault who was stooping over him and Renée ; and though his eyelids were too heavy to lift, he knew that her fingers almost touched his hair and brow.

"She is making the sign of the cross," he thought, and he knew no more.

He was very tired and weary after the painful excitement of the day, and slept more heavily than usual. His next dream was of a presence of evil in the room. It took the form of the Comtesse de Saint-Gervais, who had always disliked him, and from whose occasional kindness, as from that of her husband, he had shrunk instinctively.

"This is a pretty sight," said she—the Abbess's saying, but how different ! "Indeed, it is time the young lady was taken away to be educated. I always thought this boy was encouraged far

too much. Go away; I will watch them till that woman returns. No, I am not afraid."

When Nico next became conscious of anything, it was of a quick clatter of sharp tongues at the door. Was that Agathe at last, and what was she saying? "My master's orders"—"I shall keep her till I am forced to give her up"—"True, but Madame la Comtesse knows very well that I have been nursing that poor unfortunate boy who—" "Ah! she's gone! odious cat! Witch—viper—she-devil!"

Having thus relieved her feelings Agathe bustled across the room and tapped Monsieur Nico on the shoulder.

"Hush, hush, take care! You will wake Renée," said the boy sleepily. "She has been sleeping so well."

"And you too—like a couple of cherubs on a tomb." Agathe laughed, then hastily crossed herself.

"Was anybody here?"

"Nobody that matters. Why—did you hear anything?"

"I think I was dreaming."

"Most likely you were. But now wake up, and go off to your own room. Remember you have to start early to-morrow. There will be mass in the chapel at five. Good-night, Monsieur Nico."

"Where is l'Oiselet? I want to see him. I want to give him my cap with the pheasant plume."

"He is in bed—asleep. To-morrow morning," said Agathe hastily; she was eager to get rid of him.

"Agathe," said the boy lingering, with his eyes on his little friend, who still lay sleeping in the chair though her pillow now was a hard cushion—"will my guardian send her away? Will he send her to Fontevrault?"

"Heaven knows. People build fine castles, but heaven steps in sometimes and just gives the cards a touch and knocks them over, and those are not always the most powerful who think themselves so. Come, Monsieur Nico, it is very late, and you are asleep already."

Nico stooped over the child for a moment, then bent on one knee and kissed one of the tiny slender hands. The large dark eyes opened slowly, and Renée said, "My Nico!" then she fell asleep again.

"Oui, ton Nico—toujours, toujours!" he whispered very low.

CHAPTER X

MADAME'S GHOST

THERE were those in the Montaigle household who did not sleep well that night : some indeed found it the most alarming night of their lives : but they had not, like Gobert the fat major-domo, had more than their share of the wine-casks set flowing after the funeral. The wild wind blew no longer ; the moonless hours were silent, black and heavy. It appeared that the Marquise could not rest in her grave, for several persons bore witness to having seen her wandering ghost in the earlier hours of the night. Who could wonder ?—not those in whose ears her dying words still echoed.

More than one of the servants saw a tall white figure going swiftly along a corridor : its veiled head had looked out from a window into the night : a groom crossing the courtyard saw it, and declared that the pale light which glimmered about it could only belong to the grave. There was nothing to be done but to run trembling to one's bed, fasten the door, and smother one's eyes and ears in blankets.

The most distinguished of these terrified per-

sons was Madame de Saint-Gervais. As she went back from Renée's room to her own—she had sent her maid away, and was alone—a slight noise behind her made her look round as she crossed the grand staircase. There, in a recess, as if rising suddenly out of a wall, she saw something tall and white that moved, with long clinging garments. The dim light she carried was not enough to show her the face, and indeed this seemed to be shrouded in white wrappings of some sort.

The Comtesse, being a pious person and not sceptical, had no doubt at all of what it was she saw. She did not stop to look again, but hurried to her room with trembling limbs that would hardly carry her.

Jean shuddered when his mother told her tale, and would have poured out his own experiences but for dread of his father, who had scolded him almost beyond bearing for the heroic deed of that day. Saint-Gervais now laughed at his wife's terror, and scowled angrily when she murmured that she almost feared to take the child in defiance of her dead mother. To reassure her, however, he went out with a pistol into the passages, and came back more scornful than ever, having of course seen nothing.

No fears for the future, no ghosts, no dreams now, troubled the healthy sleep of young Nicolas d'Aumont. It was still quite dark when he awoke, but the village cocks had long been crowing and the dogs barking, while lights were

moving about the courtyards. Madame de Fontevrault's grooms and outriders were early astir. Already the wakeful and frightened servants were standing in groups, and the stories of the night were growing in spite of the sceptical steward, who put down the appearances without any doubt to the account of those wine-casks. Peasants had come gaping up from the village, which could boast of its visions too. This man or that, on his way home from the cabaret—there again!—had seen Madame la Marquise near the churchyard. For a moment only, tall, swathed in white: then she had passed into the shadow: but Colin or Gros-Guillot was ready to swear that it was Madame: and more, that she was carrying a child in her arms. However, most of the reasonable inhabitants, who had slept soundly in their beds, were inclined to disbelieve this part of the story, being convinced that Mademoiselle Renée was safe in her own room in the castle, under the faithful care of Agathe. And Father Guillaume, passing through the village before dawn, and hearing these wonderful tales, had laughed aloud.

“Impossible, neighbours, and would it were not so,” he said. “Not even his dead wife can prevail with Monsieur. He will send the child to Paris with his cousins, and who shall say him nay?”

He went on his way into the darkness of the forest, swinging his horn lantern, chuckling strangely under his beard.

The chapel bell had not yet begun to ring for mass when Nicolas ran down from his own room. He went straight to the dwarf's little cell under the stairs, expecting to find him stirring. The door stood ajar, a light streamed out from it, and l'Oiselet's voice could be heard singing. It was weaker than usual, and quavered a little: there was almost a sob in its pathetic music. The words as usual were his own: wild and simple, with more meaning for himself than for anybody else: the slow, vague, swinging tune was his own.

Où sont tes ailes,
Dis, l'Oiselet !
V'là qui s'envole
D'sus bois et blés !
Hélas, par terre,
Pauvre blessé !
Où sont les ailes
De l'Oiselet ?

Nico listened for a moment, almost awed, standing at the door. Somehow the little song sounded like a dirge for the lady who was gone, who had cared so much for her dwarf page's fanciful singing. Then he pushed the door open.

There lay l'Oiselet on his low pallet bed, a lamp burning beside him. His small white face looked pinched and withered, his great blue eyes hollow, with dark shadows under them. His thin arms, one bandaged, lay out on the coverlet.

"What, lazybones—" Nico was beginning, but stopped short. "Are you coming to mass, l'Oiselet? I shall be off afterwards, you know. Do

you see—I'll give you this cap of mine. But what is the matter. Are you going to die?"

"I'm afraid not, Monsieur Nico," said the other boy. "Thank you for the cap. I have always liked that soft brown velvet and the pheasant plume. It would be nice to be a pheasant, only they can't fly very far, I believe.

Où sont tes ailes,
Dis, l'Oiselet !

Just what I wished for. Put it on my head, Monsieur Nico: the bruises there are not so bad. I can't use my arm, you see. Ah! now show me the looking-glass yonder. Voyons! I am quite a handsome fellow. I will wear it when the mourning is over, and thank you!"

Nico stood over the bed with a long and puzzled face, balancing in his hand the little mirror which Renée had bought from a pedlar and given as a New Year's gift to her devoted l'Oiselet. The other boy, lying there, looked up and smiled: the young gentleman evidently amused him.

"I see nothing to laugh at," Nico burst out, "for there you lie as if all your bones were broken. What in the name of heaven has happened to you?"

"Oh, you have not heard?"

"What should I have heard?"

"Monsieur Nico, there is a fine old proverb, a favourite with some gentlemen, and especially with a certain Vicomte—

Oignés vilain, il vous point ;
Poignés vilain, il vous oint.

However, I don't think Monsieur le Vicomte will find it very true in my case, *vilain* though I may be."

Nico stood frowning; he was still puzzled.

"The Vicomte has done this? But what—what has he done—and when?"

"He beat me last night within an inch of my life. I rather wish that one of the blows my ribs got had fallen on my skull. This is not an easy world for the helpless, Monsieur Nico."

Nicolas felt himself growing hot with rage, as l'Oiselet gave him a picturesque version of all that had passed. At first he was sure that the Marquis had only to know of this piece of brutality to make Jean sorry that he had ever committed it. But l'Oiselet did not leave him with that delusion.

"At least he will not send Renée away with them!" he cried in a new horror.

Some mysterious light seemed to dawn in the depths of l'Oiselet's eyes, fixed in a full gaze on the young soldier.

"Oh no! The good God will see to that, Monsieur Nico."

The chapel bell began to ring as Nicolas stood thinking.

"Time to go," said the crippled lad, and the exalted look died from his face into weary wistfulness: he made a slight movement, and hardly kept back a cry of pain. "Adieu!" he said. "Be a general, a marshal of France, a brave hero, winning battles for the King—and I wish I

could ride in your company. You and I, Monsieur Nico—your good heart and straight back, and my queer ways and cunning brain—we would let the world hear of us. Mademoiselle Renée should be proud of her two servants. But you see, you must do all the work and gain all the credit alone. Go—go, and come back to her a splendid soldier, and then old Montaigle shall see good days.”

His smiling courage had once more conquered the pain. Nicolas d'Aumont, boy as he was, blushed dark red as the privileged tongue chattered thus.

“You are talking madness, my poor l'Oiselet,” he said hastily. “Adieu !”

At that early mass the dark little chapel was nearly full. The Abbess and her nuns were there, the Marquis de Montaigle, and a number of servants and retainers. Some of the peasant singers from the village had come with their Curé to help the chaplain of Fontevrault, and after the visions of that night it showed courage on their part to venture up to the chapel at all. Monsieur and Madame de Saint-Gervais were not there, nor was their son ; and it seemed that Agathe prudently thought five o'clock too early for her young mistress. The Curé would say mass later, when all those absent now would attend.

It was cold, clear daylight, though the sun had not yet risen, when the service was over. There was a bustle of servants running hither and

thither, a hurried early breakfast. Madame de Fontevrault's great coach came rumbling up into the inner courtyard; she, very grave and sad, walked up and down the great hall exchanging last words with Monsieur de Montaigle. Her visit was over, and fruitless. Diane's dying command was to be disobeyed, and her child's life was to be given into the worst hands in the world, as it honestly seemed to her cousin. Gabrielle de Mortemart, very much unaccustomed to be thwarted, was angry, mortified and grieved to the soul. The Mère de la Mothaye's loving study of her Superior had never found her so irritable, so deeply displeased; but yet it was only the Mère de la Mothaye who saw so far. To Monsieur de Montaigle the beautiful Abbess appeared that morning as a very incarnation of stately and sweet reasonableness. He had disappointed her, but she was above showing the slightest resentment. His conscience, supremely uncomfortable, his aching head after a sleepless night—all was soothed by gentle, understanding words, by the almost caressing softness of beautiful dark eyes. It was absolutely with eagerness that the Marquis granted a comparatively small request which the Abbess made to him, delaying her departure for that purpose. As he went out to give orders on the subject, he caught himself wishing that there had never been any question of sending Renée away to Versailles. He also caught himself unwillingly contrasting, as his wife had sometimes done, the brutal

clumsiness of Jean de Vassy with the graceful, straightforward, gentlemanlike air of Nicolas d'Aumont, on whom he had bestowed a few dry words of farewell and advice immediately the mass was over. Ah, but why had his own sons died? — there indeed was the beginning of troubles.

As the little master went down into the courtyard, he was aware that the servants, Madame de Fontevrault's as well as his own, were talking and staring, and that all who could were hurrying away in the direction of the stable-yard, from which a sudden clamour arose. His steward Baudouin, a prim, sleek-haired personage, came hastily to meet him.

"What is it now?" said the Marquis impatiently.

"The young gentlemen are fighting, monsieur. As to Monsieur le Chevalier, the devil seems to be in him. He attacked Monsieur le Vicomte as if he were the same age and size as himself."

"Little fool!" growled the Marquis. "I advise you to see to it, Baudouin. I am tired of all this brawling about the château, and I will make somebody responsible for it. Am I never to be left in peace? Who began this?"

"As far as I could judge, it was Monsieur d'Aumont. I saw him fly upon the Vicomte with his sword drawn."

"Peste!" And the Marquis walked off to the scene of battle, Baudouin, the soul of prudence, following cautiously behind.

He did not care for young D'Aumont, who seemed to him a penniless interloper, whereas Monsieur de Vassy was the power of the future. But he kept a quiet tongue in his head, and was careful not to make enemies more than necessary, and to use his powers as bailiff and steward with moderation.

"Baudouin!" The Marquis turned round suddenly.

"Monsieur!"

"I have given the boy, l'Oiselet, to Madame l'Abbesse de Fontevrault. She will take him away in her own coach. See that he is carefully lifted. He has had a beating."

"Yes, Monsieur."

Baudouin made the Marquis his model in shortness of speech. He knew better than to discuss orders. This was a much better fate than the little mountebank deserved. As to the beating, everybody knew or guessed the truth about that, and Baudouin wisely thought it no business of his if the Vicomte was rather revengeful and rather heavy-handed.

He could not resist following his master a little further, to see the end of the fray. Swords were clashing sharply, and Monsieur Jean, man as he was, had not at present the best of it, for Nicolas, with far more agility, had learnt to fence well.

He had gone into the stable-yard to see that his horses were ready, and found Jean there as usual, swaggering among the grooms. Some of

them encouraged him by laughing at his coarse jokes, and among these was a man of Madame de Fontevrault's, the brother-in-law of the porter Giraud whom Grand-Gui had knocked over. Jean had already had confidential communications with this man, who thought him a fine young gentleman, and was ready to flatter him as the future master of Montaigle. Jean had promised him a place as head-groom, and the fellow was quite sure that this would be much better than serving an Abbess, great and dignified as she might be.

The Vicomte de Vassy was in high spirits that morning. His fears had fled with the darkness, and he was ready to jeer at those of others. All was going well for him; by the evening, Montaigle and its mysteries would be left far behind, the little heiress would be carried off safely, and all his future possessions—diamonds, castles, lands, titles, would be assured to him almost certainly. But he had a crow to pluck with Master Nicolas, and a parting lesson to give him.

"Holà, chevalier, off to the wars!" he called out, striding a few paces to meet the boy as he came down. "Have you said good-bye for ever to Renée? You will never see her again, you know."

Nico gave him a glance of disgust, and walked on without answering. But Jean had not done with him; he followed him towards the stables, while the grooms stood grinning.

"I shall take precious care that you never see

her again. You are far too handsome, monsieur. If you try to come near her, I shall have to spoil that pretty face of yours."

Still Nico walked on a few steps, turning from red to white, while Jean's insults and jokes pursued him.

"See what airs the pretty boy gives himself. You would think he was of the blood royal, while the fact is that nobody knows——"

"Liar and coward!" Nicolas turned round suddenly and faced him, then in an instant pulled off his glove and struck him lightly across the mouth with it. "You talk of a lady in the stable-yard, you beat a cripple," he said. "Defend yourself!" and drawing his sword he flew upon Jean furiously.

"Young gentlemen! In the name of the law! Remember that duelling is forbidden," cried the steward, hurrying up; but as neither of them listened to a word he said, and he did not care to interfere personally between two flashing rapiers, he prudently ran off to fetch his master.

The Marquis, walking quickly, with a very stern face, came under the archway into the stable court. The grooms were standing round, staring in breathless interest; the two youths were fighting furiously. Jean had already a slight wound in the arm which made him howl, and a few drops of blood had fallen on the stones. Nicolas, as white as death, his blue eyes blazing, seemed in his quick passes to have no object short of killing his adversary,

and Jean's clumsiness of make and movement was much against him.

"Stop!" the Marquis thundered, and his light walking-stick struck the two swords into the air. "Do you wish to spend a few days in my prison, both of you?"

They stood panting and glaring at each other.

"Ah, let us fight, monsieur!" muttered Nicolas.

"Monsieur, he began it," cried Jean. "He attacked me—I had hardly time to draw my sword—he wounded me——"

The Marquis's keen eyes glanced from one to the other, and there was a curious expression of disgust as he looked at Jean.

"Poch! a pin-scratch. Go to your mother," he said, and turned his back upon him; then took young D'Aumont by the arm and led him away.

Jean swore and raged; then became suddenly conscious that some of the by-standers were smiling. Their faces became grave very quickly as he scowled upon them.

"Ah, you can all insult me now," he said. "But my day will come, and I shall remember my friends. Even you, Baudouin; why are you skulking off in such haste?"

"An order from Monsieur le Marquis. May I venture—I hope Monsieur le Vicomte is not seriously hurt—these boyish quarrels——"

"Hurt—no—but you all saw it was no doing of mine. That D'Aumont flew upon me like a

wild cat. Ah! one of these days we must fight it out—he has always been insolent to me, and has a firebrand of a temper that will not bear the smallest joke. I must have this stupid cut bound up. I verily believe the little scamp would have liked to kill me.”

He lounged away. Baudouin shook his head as he looked round at the grooms.

“’Tis all very fine, fellows: Monsieur Jean will be seigneur of Montaigle one of these days,” he said, “and the other boy will be nobody.”

“So much the worse,” one or two of the men were ready to murmur.

The Marquis made Nicolas mount his horse, and walked a few yards beside him through the gateway, Jacquot the groom following. He reproved the boy sharply for drawing his sword on Jean de Vassy. Why had he done it? Nicolas, still trembling with rage and excitement, could give no answer, but stared at his horse’s ears.

“Had you no reason?” his guardian persisted.

Nicolas had had many; he burst out with one of them.

“Why did Jean dare to say that I should never see Renée again?”

The Marquis hesitated and frowned; but he answered not unkindly:

“He was wrong to say it. But that is a subject on which I will have no quarrelling. If Jean has little at present to do with it, you have still less; you have nothing. Remember that, Nicolas.”

"Monsieur—pardon—I have always been Renée's brother," the boy cried out, bitterly hurt by the cold words.

"That is childishness, and must be forgotten. Be a man, and give your thoughts to your noble profession of arms."

"But, Monsieur, Renée will be here, or at Fontevrault? I shall see her again?"

"I do not know. Attend to your own affairs, and ask no more questions. Away with you, young man."

And Nicolas could only take off his hat in answer to his guardian's parting salute, before the Marquis had turned his back and walked away. The horses clattered on down the slope. Nico did not look back: he might have been glad to know, having a sort of affection for the only father he knew, that the Marquis turned round presently and stood in the shade of the archway to watch him riding away straight and swift in the golden dawn.

There went the first of the three young creatures who had helped Diane de Montaigne to bear her life. The Abbess of Fontevrault would take the second; the Saint-Gervais cousins the third, and she the chief jewel among all the treasures of his house. Though he might repent in his heart, he did not change his intention, and certainly he did not imagine that any power of man or spirit would come between him and its fulfilment. And no one had yet dared to tell him of the strange appearances of the night.

Neither had Nicolas yet heard anything of them. Jacquot the groom, who rode silently after him, proposed to himself to regale the boy with horrors on their way, but not till they had passed the forest, a dangerous ground for such stories. And his young master had enough to make him hold his tongue sadly, as he rode through the village street. He had been thrown out roughly into an unknown world. All he cared for, it seemed, was henceforth to be nothing to him; and the unconquerable joy of young life and merry adventure had not yet asserted its splendid claim.

The village was cheerful in the dawn; cocks were crowing, and the early peasants were astir: going to their work, they stared with sleepy curiosity after the little chevalier as he passed them, his gay accoutrements flashing in the morning light, his horse's feet clanking on the stones. Nicolas touched his hat many a time, but stopped to speak to no one till a long and skinny man dressed in black came out from a house opposite the church on his way to ring the *Angelus*. He had taught Nicolas to read and write, and to spell through a little Latin.

"Adieu, maître!" cried the boy. "I am off to Angers."

"Ah! good luck go with you: don't forget your lessons," said the schoolmaster.

"No more of them!" said Nico with a laugh.

He was passing on, but the old man signed to him to stop, and he pulled in his horse rather

impatiently. This was the greatest gossip in the world, and he had never felt less inclined for talking. Besides, there was no time for delay.

But the schoolmaster certainly looked very curious: he was much paler than usual, and his thin hair seemed to bristle under his black cap.

"May I ask a question, Monsieur Nico? Is the little lady safe?"

"Safe? Yes: what do you mean? I saw her last night, well and asleep," said Nicolas hastily, while Jacquot pressed forward open-mouthed to hear.

"Ah! These fools will fancy anything. But certainly a phantom was seen in the village, not long after midnight. Several persons bear witness to that—'tis not only Gros-Guillot, poor wretch, stumbling home from the cabaret as usual. Monsieur le Curé and I know him too well, do you see, to believe a word he says. But other people saw it, sober men and women who happened to look out by chance. They say it was tall, clothed in white draperies, bearing a child in its arms. It was hastening away to the forest. Now, Monsieur Nico, nobody would dare to say that the dying words of Madame la Marquise go for nothing, and I hear she was seen last night walking about the château. It is a difficulty, of course, that a spirit should carry a living child—but the older I grow, Monsieur Nico, the more convinced am I that we live in a world of impenetrable mysteries. They tell me that the Saint-Gervais family are to take away

the child to Paris with them this very day—in that case, what wonder if her mother——”

Nicolas shuddered, and became angry suddenly. “Oh, Maître Pimbaux, it is a string of old wives’ tales!” he cried out. “As to Paris”—he remembered l’Oiselet with real consolation—“the good God will see to that. In the meanwhile, I tell you, Mademoiselle is safe with Agathe at the château. And I hate these mysteries of yours, and I don’t believe in them.”

“Ah! well, go on your way,” said the schoolmaster. “Old wives’ tales—very well!”

His lank, stooping figure passed on across the road. The boy set spurs to his horse and galloped through the village, Jacquot clattering behind him. As they plunged into the silence and deep shadow of the forest, Nicolas shivered in spite of himself—“a spirit passed before his eyes, and the hair of his flesh stood up.” Little Renée, childish, warm and sweet—there seemed to be no right connection between her and the most motherly of cold white ghosts.

“That Pimbaux is an old fool,” he told himself. “I wish I had gone to her door this morning. But I have to remember that it is not my business—and yet I will never forget thee, dear little love, and I will see thee again in spite of Jean de Vassy. Get on, good horse! What magnificent birds! I wish I could shoot them!”—as a brace of pheasants, disturbed from their night’s rest on an oak branch above his head, scuffled off into deeper shades of woodland.

CHAPTER XI

THIEVES' CORNER

THE Marquis de Montaigle's new road, along which Nicolas and his groom travelled, led through the most romantic depths of the wild and vast forest. But the young soldier found nothing terrible in its silence and loneliness. No wolves, beast or human, no poachers or highwaymen, crossed his path; no ghostly hunt came whirling down any of the green mysterious drives that opened on the main road, deserted as they. He did not give a thought to any possible dangers, leaving all that to Jacquot, who rode with pistols ready. Though Nicolas was not much given to fairy-tales, he had heard plenty of them from l'Oiselet, and that morning he could have fancied that these avenues led to the Fairy Queen's own palace. She and her court might well come dancing down the emerald floor.

In truth, in the misty shining glory of that autumn dawn, the whole forest was like some palace with jewelled pillars and roofs of gold. High above the soft mossy ground the stately beeches rose flaming to the sky. Red and bronzed leaves trembled in the breath of the

morning, and the sunbeams danced through their gorgeous array. White mists, like long processions, were flying down the slopes of the wood to their refuge in low reedy places, leaving crimson briars and golden bracken sparkling with diamonds of dew.

As Nicolas left Montaigle farther behind him, the world seemed to expand, and with the new day a new life was opening for him. The gloom of the past weeks, unnatural to his age, began to pass away with the shadows of the old towers. Ghost stories began to seem absurd, like dreams; hope, and faith in the future, so much more easy than despair at fifteen, took possession of his mind. He heartily promised himself that one of these days, with strength and opportunity, he would show Jean de Vassy which was the better man of the two, and would pay him off for swaggering insults to himself and brutality to helpless l'Oiselet. Meanwhile, his new horse danced under him in the fresh woodland air; his new sword had behaved well in its first trial that morning.

The worst bit of the road was near the southwest boundary of the forest; not far beyond this it joined the road to Angers, which was fairly straight, while that to Saumur and Fontevrault struck off sharply to the left. At this difficult point the woodland country rose rather suddenly from a tract of low marshy ground with thickets of rushes, and old many-stemmed thorns now red with berries. A waste of brown bracken

spread away from the road, deep in ruts, which climbed down from the forest itself, to cross these lowlands. The road had been cut slantwise down the side of the hill, and even before leaving the forest it was very steep, rough and stony. In older times it had often been impassable, and was so now in the worst weather. Bad characters and people of the road had been wont to lurk about the foot of the hill, watching for travellers in difficulty. The place was called the Coin des Larrons, and even now bore a doubtful reputation. Jacquot's pistols were readier than ever, and his eyes glanced nervously from side to side as he followed his young master.

But to-day one would have said there was no living creature within a mile, except the squirrels that raced up into the fir-trees. All the country beyond the wood lay at their feet, lonely and still in the autumn sunshine; there was hardly a sound except the plunging and sliding of the horses in a torrent of loose stones.

"One would say all the thieves in France had had the making of this road!" cried the young chevalier.

As he spoke his horse shied so violently that he nearly lost his seat.

"What is that?" he exclaimed, recovering himself. "Jacquot, Jacquot, here!"

"Oh, monsieur, it's nothing," cried honest Jacquot, his teeth beginning to chatter. "Ride on in heaven's name, this is not a place to stop!"

But Nico had already jumped to the ground, and he had to push on and catch at the bridle; the horse stood quietly enough now.

They were at a sharp turn in the hill, where a group of tall beeches almost overhung the road. Among their mossy roots, quite visible from the road, something white was lying, partly wrapped in a great crimson cloak. It was not on a level with the road, and Nico, before reaching it, had to swing himself up a few yards of bank through which lower roots made a strong tracery.

Jacquot vociferated in vain.

"Monsieur Nico—it is no concern of ours. Some trick of thieves or of the Evil One"—he crossed himself, and swore softly under his breath. "Monsieur Nico, what is it? What has he got there, au nom de——"

Nico turned his head; he was white to the lips.

"Hold your tongue, fool," he said. "It is Mademoiselle Renée."

"Oh, no, no!" Jacquot trembled mightily. "It is some phantom," he muttered. "Holy Mary and all the blessed saints preserve us, for this must be the work of the devil! But let me see——" He loosened a pistol and edged the horses gradually near the side of the road.

"Stay where you are," cried Nicolas sternly.

He knelt beside Renée in utter bewilderment. It was herself, alive, sleeping, in the midst of tumbled curls and crimson wrappings. It was the same child to whom he had said good-bye last night, in the safety of her own room. The

stories of the peasants were true then, it seemed : for what but supernatural power could have carried her all these miles across the forest? Her mother's doing, surely: and he had laughed at tales of that passing phantom, which after all must have been real. Yet, even as the boy gazed and wondered, his brain was struggling to find some reasonable explanation. He had no turn for mystery, and hated it; except as concerned with those great truths which he believed without question. But they were on a different plane.

Renée woke when Nicolas touched her, opening sleepy eyes as bewildered as his own.

"Nico! Where am I?" she said, and held out her arms.

He kissed her without answering, and stroked back her hair. She was cold, and shivered suddenly. He drew the cloak round her, and rubbed her hands between his own.

"But where am I?" the child repeated. "How did I come here?"

"You are out in the forest, dear little one, but how you came here—I wish I knew! Can you remember anything about it? What is the last thing you remember?"

"I don't know. Let me look—is that your new horse? Do put me on his back. I should like a ride of all things. But how did you find me—where is Agathe? How *did* I come here, Nico?"

"God knows! I don't," the boy answered,

staring at her with such a completely puzzled air that she began to laugh.

"It's nice out here, like fairyland. It's like one of l'Oiselet's stories—but I didn't think they were true. Now, Nico, you can put me on your horse and carry me off into the world, and we shall be a prince and princess, and have adventures, and if we come to any wicked people, you will fight for me, won't you?"

"Yes, that I will. But Renée, Renée, who brought you out of the château? Seriously, what are we to do? Must I take you back there?"

Nico frowned distractedly, with two fingers pressed on his forehead. His brain refused to work in presence of such a problem.

"Take me back? No, indeed you shall not," Mademoiselle Renée at once decided, and she now looked brilliantly happy, even mischievous, sitting up among her wrappings. "No, my little Nico, if they have lost me, they may find me. It is a pretty game of hide-and-seek. How I shall laugh at Agathe when I see her again!"

"But Monsieur your father——" Nico tried to argue, but she laughed and put her hand over his mouth.

"He doesn't love me," she said. "Nor Monsieur le Comte, nor Madame la Comtesse, nor that horrid Jean. I have only you in the world—I am your little sister—*she* said so, Nico—I understood, and I remember, though I am a little girl. So, you see, you are going away, and you must take me with you, dear"

She laughed in his face, for never did chosen knight look more puzzled or more distressed. He kissed the little hand, but did not move; and meanwhile Jacquot had something to do in keeping the two horses quiet in the road. He was completely mystified, and just too far off to hear what the young creatures said to each other among the beech-boles.

“Ah, mon Dieu!” sighed Nicolas. “And you remember nothing of last night or this morning, Renée? You cannot tell at all who brought you here? When I left you last night, Agathe was there, and you were asleep in your own room.”

“Oh, yes, I know. She woke me after you went away, and made me drink hot milk with a sweet taste in it. I liked it—and then I suppose I went to sleep again. Since then, I know nothing.”

“A sweet taste!” the boy repeated dreamily.

“Yes, sweet and funny. I wish I could have some now, Nico; I’m hungry.”

“Hungry! and I have nothing,” Nico exclaimed in despair. “Come, dear, I see some briars over there; let us gather some blackberries. They will be better than nothing, and then we must think. If I only knew how it was! Could Agathe possibly—but no!”

“No, no, somebody must have carried me, and Agathe can only just lift me, I am so big now. I’ll tell you—it was my guardian angel.”

“If only I understood!—but there’s only one thing to do—I must take her back to Montaigle,”

he sighed to himself. "Poor child! I might find some breakfast for her at old Guillaume's by the way."

Renée had sprung to her feet and was standing, a slender little white figure, by the tree. Whoever had brought her away from home, she was carefully and warmly dressed; a hood, which had fallen off, had been tied over her dark curls. Nicolas rose more slowly, his eyes still full of wonder. He had a new idea that the child might have been drugged and carried off—but then, by whom, and why had she been left alone here? He was thinking so hard that he forgot the blackberries. L'Oiselet's look and words came back to him—"The good God will see to that!" That meant, the Saint-Gervais should not take Renée away to Paris; but what could a crippled, helpless being like l'Oiselet do?

"Come, what are you thinking about?" the child said, and put her hand in his—when suddenly Jacquot in the road gave a cry:

"Monsieur Nico—monsieur—here comes the coach of Madame l'Abbesse de Fontevrault?"

"Dieu merci!" cried the boy. "Ah, yes, Renée, it was your guardian angel who brought you here."

He felt suddenly illuminated. This was why Renée's friend, still unknown, had brought her through the forest and laid her here beside the road, in a place where the coach must pass very slowly, and where the Abbess's people could not fail to see her. Still, it was very strange that

she should have been left here unguarded, a prey for any wild beast, human or other, who might be prowling about the lonely precincts of the Coin des Larrons. These thoughts flashed through the lad's mind as he hastily threw the great cloak once more round the child and lifted her down the bank into the clearer light of the road.

"Go a few yards up the hill and stop Madame l'Abbesse," he said to Jacquot, staring and gaping with curiosity.

Renée clung to his hand as they waited.

"But if my Aunt de Rochechouart takes me, you must come too," she said.

"No, chérie."

The Abbess's mounted escort came clattering noisily along, the sunshine catching their points of steel—Barnabé, Pierre, Marc, Michel and the rest, with Philippe, rather Judas-faced, brother-in-law of Giraud the porter. In another moment, crowding round the sharp turn in the road, all these horses and men seemed to flow like a torrent round Jacquot and his two horses. There was a sudden confusion, plunging and shouting; then at Barnabé's orders the men drew up on the other side, and the postilions stopped the coach as it jolted round the corner, just before beginning the steepest descent of the hill.

The terrified face of Mère de la Mothaye appeared at the window. She had just been devoutly giving thanks for their happy escape from the Château de Montaigle, and for a safe journey

through the depths of the forest. Now she thought that all the robbers in Anjou had assembled in this wild place to bar the way.

"One of the coach-horses has a stone in his foot, probably," said the Abbess from her corner. "The road seems to be worse than when we came, a week ago."

On the front seat of the coach, between two nuns who supported him, lay l'Oiselet, white with pain, for this journey, which gave him intense mental joy, was physical agony. But he bore the jolting without a groan, though his body was a mass of bruises and all his bones seemed out of joint and he felt as if he could not live to reach Fontevrault. When the sudden stoppage came, he lifted his head, flushing and smiling with such a rapture in his great blue eyes that the nearest nun stared at him in half-suspicious wonder. The Abbess's eye was also caught for a moment by the change in the boy's suffering face, and she remembered it afterwards.

Since leaving Montaigle her mind had been occupied with one thought, one question; how was she to gain possession of the child, Diane's child, in spite of prejudices, plots, and family arrangements? Now, in some utterly mysterious fashion, the child was brought to her coach-door. The Mère de la Mothaye drew back with a pious exclamation, and the Abbess had had hardly time to come forward, when Nicolas d'Aumont lifted Renée to the coach-step, and from there to her arms. They closed round the little slender

form in a clasp that was not likely to be loosened again. The Abbess laughed, but her dark eyes filled suddenly with tears.

“Mon Dieu! Monsieur le Chevalier!” she exclaimed; and Nicolas never forgot the look she fixed upon him. “Have you done this?” she said. “Have you carried off our little Renée for me? Your first campaign, and truly a successful one!”

“Madame! No, I have done nothing,” answered Nicolas, blushing crimson. “I wish I had——”

It was part of the Mortemart charm, perhaps, to make men feel how easy it would be, under those inspiring eyes, to fetch the moon out of the sky or an enemy’s flag from the centre of a besieged city.

“Who did it then?” said the Abbess.

Nicolas stood by the door and told her how he had found the child.

“Strange! And she knows nothing? Well, my Renée, I hope you are your real self, and not a fairy changeling.”

“Yes, ma tante, I am real,” said the child.

The nuns were nodding their heads within, the grooms were chattering in low tones without. They had all heard of the phantom of the night, and all, therefore, had their explanation ready. Even the Abbess’s shrewd mind was puzzled; but she looked again at l’Oiselet’s beaming eyes, at the flushing and fading cheeks as his little mistress smiled at him, and somehow suspected

an explanation. She asked no questions, however, till the journey was over, but immediately ordered her stove to be lighted and some soup warmed for Renée, holding her all the time and saying softly: "Chère Diane—I have her at last—and against all the world I will keep her safely."

"Madame—how will you keep her?" murmured the Mère de la Mothaye, with visions of angry fathers and cousins, only too much right on their side, storming the Abbey of Fontevrault.

"Easily," said Gabrielle de Rochechouart with a touch of haughtiness. "I shall write to the King."

The coach rumbled on down the stony hill, turned to the left, and disappeared, outriders and all, on the flat and lonely road to Saumur. Nicolas, who had remounted, rode by the door as far as the parting of the roads, and then with a low bow and flourish of his hat disappeared out of his little playfellow's life, this time, as it seemed, finally. Her new aunt's utmost tenderness could hardly console Renée.

When all were gone, there was a rustling of the bracken on the steep slope of the wood above the Coin des Larrons, a few yards only from the group of beeches where Renée had been laid by her mysterious conductors. All the time, any one who had examined the hill closely might have seen the barrel of a musket peeping through the brown and russet mass of

bracken and briars, and the long dark face of a crouching giant behind it. No wild animal could have lain more motionless, noiselessly waiting for its prey, than Grand-Gui as he kept guard over Mademoiselle Renée asleep. But the affair was safely over now. He rose to his full height, looked and listened cautiously up and down the road, gave a great yawn and a tremendous stretch, then plunged into the thickets and took a straight line across the forest to his father's hut near its other boundary.

In the dusky evening of the fourth day from this, Joli-gars and Agathe met in their usual trysting-place under the great chestnut by the chapel. Agathe had much to say to her young lover, for the events of the last few days had drawn them together, she had been satisfied with his conduct and her own, and she was quite aware that the news she brought him to-night would not be very welcome. He already knew that a messenger had come from Madame de Fontevrault, setting the Marquis's mind at rest as to the safety of his little daughter, so that orders had been given to stop the search which had gone on furiously ever since she disappeared, and in which he and his brother had taken an active share, while Agathe wept and tore her hair like any tragic actress. Her story was that she had awaked, that fatal morning, to find the child gone. It seemed that no

one about the château could even guess at any explanation, except the awful one that Madame la Marquise had herself borne Renée away from the fate she dreaded for her. Even the Comte de Saint-Gervais, though he suspected everybody, could positively accuse no one, and his wife was quite carried away by terror and superstition. Jean had confided to her his story of the spectre in the chapel: the stories of the servants all tended the same way: and after putting off their journey for one day, the Saint-Gervais departed for Paris, leaving a mystery behind them. The Comte assured his cousin Montaigle that it would be unravelled some day: but the Marquis shook his head and looked at him wildly.

"How can we tell?" he said. "How do we know anything—anything?"

"We know what our reason teaches us, my dear Mathieu. Depend upon it, this is some foul play, and no spirit has anything to do with it."

But Mathieu would not listen, and his cousin went away muttering:

"Best leave these lunatics to come to their right minds. As they have infected Françoise and that noodle of a boy, the affair for the present is hopeless."

Madame de Fontevrault's letter did not clear up the mystery. It assured Monsieur de Montaigle of his child's safety: but how she came to that side of the forest, where young D'Aumont

found her, was still unknown. Very decidedly the Abbess took for granted that the child would now remain with her: indeed, she said that a command from the highest quarters would alone make her resign her charge, received in so mysterious a fashion. She asked whether her good cousin would send his reply by the hands of Renée's own waiting-woman; and this news, that she was going the next day to Fontevrault, was what Agathe had to tell Joli-gars that evening.

She felt his strong hands tremble a little, but could hardly see his face in the darkness under the tree.

"I do assure you," she said, "I felt so wicked when the poor old master gave me my orders, I very nearly went down on my knees and told him all. His face looked so grey, so thin, I thought he would follow Madame before long—and when they two meet, Joli-gars, and when she tells him she had nothing to do with it, what a set of traitors he will think us all!"

"Oh no, he will laugh and be pleased with us," Joli-gars said cheerfully. "He will say we were quite right to do what she wished. He will forgive us in a moment. How would he feel in Paradise, if those Saint-Gervais demons had taken the demoiselle?"

"Still I am sorry to have deceived him, though it was for his good. He meant to be kind to us in his way—to you and me."

"How was that?" The clutch of Joli-gars,

which she had rashly allowed by way of farewell, became suddenly tighter.

“Take care, elephant! When Madame la Comtesse was going to carry the child away without me, he invented a nice little plan to comfort me. It was to marry you—do you hear?—and live in one of his houses in the village. Gently—let me go, or I will not say a word more.”

“What did you say?” murmured Joli-gars tenderly.

“I thanked Monsieur le Marquis, and said I did not wish it.”

“Méchante! That was not true.”

“Indeed it was.”

“It is not true now, then. You shall go back to Monsieur le Marquis, and tell him to send some one else to Fontevrault. You are not made to be shut up with a crowd of nuns. Tell him you will marry your poor Charlot, and will live with him in the little house in the village. Come, I have deserved this reward.”

“You have deserved nothing at all.”

“What! Not for acting ghost, and terrifying Madame la Comtesse and the whole château and village out of their seven senses, and carrying Mademoiselle Renée safe off into the forest till that beast Grand-Gui took her out of my very arms, and almost woke her too soon! Not deserved anything for all that—for risking life and limb to obey your orders, ma'mselle! Did you think a kiss and a word would do—that I could

be whistled down the wind till we were both old and grey-headed—*voyons donc !*”

“*Mon petit Charlot*, let me tell you, you are rather too bold. I have never promised you anything, remember, and if you are so scornful and so impatient, you may lose what you have already. Come, you know there is not another man at Montaigle that I ever speak to, and after you have done so much for our little lady, you will not grudge me to her now. I know how the child wants me—and after all, neither she nor I need spend all our lives at Fontevrault.”

“If there is not another man at Montaigle, there may be at Fontevrault.”

“Monks and grooms! You really are a little foolish this evening. Nobody so tall as you—I can wager that safely.”

“I have to stoop rather far, to be sure!”

“Hush! Stand still!” Agathe whispered suddenly.

Joli-gars had half lifted her off her feet in an embrace which she did not refuse him. He stopped her now with a silent kiss, but she struggled from him, and they stood breathless, hand in hand, listening to slow uncertain steps that were approaching the chapel door from the courtyard. There was the tapping of a cane against uneven stones in the twilight.

Agathe and Joli-gars watched from the deep shadow where they stood, and saw the little Marquis pass before them, bent and tottering

like an old man of eighty. Then the chapel door creaked as he pushed it open and stepped into the dim interior. As he went he muttered something, but all that they could hear was one name, dwelt upon and repeated :

“Diane—Diane !”

CHAPTER XII

THE ABBEY GARDEN

THE garden at Fontevrault was never more lovely or more attractive than on a certain afternoon in May. A perfect warmth, a light clear air with none of the oppressiveness of summer; early pink roses clustering against the white walls and archways half hidden by heavy masses of ancient ivy, and mixing their sweetness with the sharper scent of young walnut leaves, brought out by the sun after a shower. Down from the great church and the wide courts and quadrangles where old walnut-trees grew, the long ranges of buildings, the shady quiet cloister, there led the garden avenue of tall limes, not yet in blossom, all their delicate young leaves damp and shining, softly shaken by the wind and the birds. Somebody was playing the organ in the church, and the stately music, which followed a stranger down the avenue, also filled those white courts where windows stood open, where the young pensionnaires sat at their needlework, a nun reading to them softly and monotonously in the sleepy afternoon. In other rooms, other inmates of the Abbey, nuns, guests, servants, carried on

their peaceful employments with that solemn music in their ears.

Going on down the avenue, it faded gradually away and the song of the birds took its place, the deep sweet whistle of the loriote, as his gold plumage flashed among the leaves, distinguished among the many birds of the garden; the thrushes, the blackbirds, joyfully anticipating a fine feast of fruit, for the Abbess loved her feathered boarders; and then lower down, the nightingales. But that was when one had passed along the tall avenue and plunged into the shadowy path under the *charmilles*, the alleys of clipped limes which bordered most of the garden, leading to sunny spaces of grass or golden gravel, where roses again bloomed luxuriantly, here and there hanging over the stone edge of a fountain where Cupids watched the water-lilies and the gold and silver fish. Terraces with flights of stone steps broke the level of the garden, dividing one series of alleys and parterres from another. There seemed to be room for many romances in such a region of mingled sweetness and formality, where the shady walks might lead on for ever under the thick arches of leaves, nightingale-haunted. Indeed, this convent garden knew histories beyond those of the nuns who walked there sometimes in their hours of recreation. The Abbess's guests were many and worldly at certain times in the year, from Madame de Montespan in her fallen greatness, beautiful,

passionate, nervous, miserable, to all the men and women of fashion, of learning, of science, who loved and revered Madame de Fontevrault. Here they came for peace and quiet, for religious retreat, for advice, for family meetings, and if they went back much the same into a world not particularly moral, who can say that the influence of Fontevrault, its splendid church services, its irreproachable inner life, was altogether wasted? If Madame Gabrielle was very tolerant, she was never wrongly indulgent to herself or to others. Custom would not allow an Abbess of Fontevrault to shut herself out from the world: but one Abbess after another had proved that she knew how to be the salt of the world.

The garden had royal recollections: to go no farther back, the little Queen Mary Stuart played there at six years old, when she was brought to visit Madame Louise de Bourbon. Henry IV., when King of Navarre, walked there with his aunt, Madame Eléonore de Bourbon. The great Mademoiselle, in the reign of Madame Jeanne Baptiste de Bourbon, spent a few days at Fontevrault with the unusual result of being bored. Her only amusement there was the gambols of a poor crazy nun behind the bars of her cage.

“Lire, bâtir, jardiner”—these were the three chief pleasures of Madame Gabrielle de Rochecouart. When not busy with the thousand affairs of her community, to which she and her

secretaries attended diligently for several hours of every day, she was reading Greek or French philosophy, improving the buildings of the Abbey, beautifying the garden; and here in summer she spent all the time she could spare, read and wrote here, entertained circles of friends here, directing her labourers meanwhile, watching the growth of her trees with all the interest of her contemporary, Madame de Sévigné.

There was an alcove at the end of one of those dark leafy corridors, built of white stone, with roses arching its entrance and a large lilac-bush close by. It was furnished with a stone seat, two or three stools and a table, and it looked out into a sunny space of grass where a fountain was always playing. The soft splash of the water, the voice of a nightingale just now and then in the shade, chimed sweetly in with the rich low tones of Madame Gabrielle, sitting that afternoon in her favourite garden refuge, and reading in the ears of one listener from a favourite book—La Fontaine's "Fables"—which she appreciated more wisely than the general public of that day. Her listener, sitting upright on a high stool, her hands discreetly folded across a piece of white embroidery just finished, was not quite so attentive as she ought to have been. A perfectly brought-up young lady of sixteen, in the black dress and formal cap of a convent pupil, her lovely eyes and mouth spoke of dreams of life far outside the convent wall. The dress was growing oddly inappropriate to

Mademoiselle de Montaigle, who had now worn it for six years and a half. Still a child in her impetuous loving ways, she was a woman in beauty and wilfulness. Only two people in the convent could really manage Renée; it had always been so; the Abbess herself and the Abbess's niece, Louise de Rochechouart de Mortemart, now her aunt's chapelaine, the Mère de la Mothaye having become Grand Prioress. Herself a girl of sixteen when Renée was brought to Fontevrault, Louise had taken charge of the child, had become her "little mother"; and though her grave and thoughtful nature was unlike Renée's in every way, she had won and kept her devoted love. Now Renée was a reasonable being, and discipline was no longer necessary; but there was always a certain barrier between her and her young companions, owing partly to her relationship with the Abbess, partly to the strange circumstances of her home and of her coming to the Abbey; and Madame Gabrielle kept Diane's child as constantly near herself as possible, read with her, trained her, till some of the community wondered whether Mademoiselle de Montaigle was meant to follow in the steps of Mademoiselle de Mortemart. The guests who flocked to the Abbey in Lent and in September made their remarks—had the little heiress really developed a vocation?—they saw no signs of it; or if not, why did not some of her distinguished connections come forward to arrange a marriage for her? Was her extra-

ordinary old father too mad to be approached on the subject? It was said at Versailles that the only person who ever saw him was his cousin Saint-Gervais, who went down to Montaigle every winter to hunt with him. But Saint-Gervais was not a gossip, and held his tongue discreetly as to past, present and future. And no one ventured to interrogate the Abbess of Fontevrault.

After reading a few of her most admired fables, the Abbess paused and looked at Renée's soft young profile, the dreamy gaze that watched a bird perched on Cupid's shoulder ready to bathe in the fountain, the smiling mouth, the graceful turn of head and neck about which dark curls rippled, escaping from cap and ribbon.

"What are you thinking of, child?" said Madame de Fontevrault suddenly.

The clear pale skin became rosy. Renée came back to the present, lifting her long eyelashes with a little air of surprise.

"Is it the truth you want, madame?"

"Certainly. What was the last fable I read?"

"I don't know!"

"Precisely. Well?"

"I was thinking of Nico. I wonder if I shall ever see him again. I wonder where he is now. No one knows how good he was to me, when I was a naughty little girl. Do you know where he is, dear aunt?"

"No. I suppose he is doing his duty—as we all must."

“Duty is a dry sort of thing,” said Renée, with a sigh.

The Abbess was silent. No one in the world, not even her oldest friends, except perhaps the sister she so heartily loved and pitied, ever talked to her with the freedom of this girl. Her niece Louise, one day to be her successor, in whom her confidence was perfect, was all obedient reverence in her presence, and neither her nuns nor her guests could ever forget the position she held, gently as she used it. But the child Renée—well, there were explanations, and Madame de Fontevrault could never bring herself to check that fearless nature. Renée had learnt a love for her own gentle mother of a kind long before its time in the world at large; her early childhood had known very little restraint; and besides this, the Abbess watched with amusement some of the characteristics of Mathieu de Montaigne, his plain speech, his unworldliness, his pride and resolute will, in the child he had been forced to confide to her care. There was no danger that Renée would fail in keeping any rules of outward etiquette, when she and her second mother were not alone; so the Abbess let this state of things be, and in her heart loved it.

“Come here,” she said, pointing to her footstool, and in a moment Renée was at her feet.

She laid down her beautiful *La Fontaine*, bound in blue morocco, with her arms on the

side, took off the girl's cap and twisted her fingers in her hair, curling it and playing with it.

"We must not dream of the past, my Renée," she said. "It is your future that I have to think of now, child, and the past has nothing to do with it. Do you ever reflect that you cannot stay at Fontevrault for ever?"

"Why not? I have no mother but you."

"You have a father, and you have large estates waiting for you, and a husband, and a position as one of the great ladies of France. I have tried to educate my Renée for all that, and I do not fear that she will discredit me at Versailles. The less so that the Court is very different now—better, I suppose," and she sighed. "Some people find it dull, I believe; but you will not miss what you have never known."

"Perhaps not," said Renée, "but I should have liked to live in the days of the Regency or the Fronde, when people had adventures. I think a dull Court must be something ridiculous."

The Abbess smiled. "As long as human nature lasts," she said, "there will be adventures of one kind or another; and morality gains, no doubt, by civilisation. Yes, these changes make it easier for people to be good. You hardly know what society was five-and-twenty years ago, when your dear mother and I were at the Abbaye aux Bois. You have fallen on better times, Renée. Now listen, my dear. My brother, your uncle de Vivonne, writes of a

young gentleman in the south whose fortune and estates would match your own——”

Renée shook her curls violently. “No, no; I will have nothing to do with him.”

“A little less haste, mademoiselle, if you please. It is possible that this splendid marriage may not be offered to you. At least a dozen families are fighting for the honour. And then, the young man is a ward of his Majesty’s, and our family interest at Court is not what it was, though as to myself my confidence in the King’s friendship is always strong. Still, my brother thinks the arrangement not improbable. He is working for you. If the offer is made, I shall accept it with enthusiasm.”

“And my father—what would he say?”

“He could not refuse a suggestion from such high quarters.”

As the Abbess spoke she remembered the Saint-Gervais intrigues of old. She had heard no more of those family plots. She had done her duty by Diane and saved her child, and was now on the brink of arranging a really good marriage for her. But it was never quite safe to reckon without Renée.

“Madame, I am convinced that I have a vocation. When I tell you that, you will not drive me into any marriage.”

The girl spoke low and hurriedly, without looking up. The Abbess frowned and flushed a little.

“As you are the only person convinced, you will not expect me to listen to you. And how

you contradict yourself! With one breath you wish for adventures, with the next you ask to be shut up for life in a convent."

"It is the happiest place in the world."

"That may be, but it is not a life-long home for you. Remember, Renée, I will hear no more of this. Vocation, indeed! little trifle! You ought to do penance for even mentioning the word."

As she spoke, a small figure in black came limping swiftly out of the shade of the limes. It was l'Oiselet, a boy no longer, but the thinnest, smallest, most spiritual-looking creature that ever led an active life among his fellows. The Abbess's page, secretary, private musician, confidential servant, he had been now for more than six years the most familiar and most trusted figure outside the actually cloistered world of Fontevrault. His bright eyes saw everything, his clever brain found no combination too difficult, his heart seemed one flame of unselfish devotion. L'Oiselet had long ago confessed to his new mistress the manner in which Mademoiselle Renée had been spirited away from Montaigle; but that confession had gone no farther, and as the foresters had carefully held their tongues, the château and the forest, with a well-proved ghost story, were more than ever places of awe to the neighbourhood.

"Madame," said l'Oiselet, coming forward, "a messenger from the King."

He looked at Renée with his brightest smile, and muttered something about "a visitor," but

the Abbess took no notice of that. She rose instantly, saying to Renée, "Wait for me here," and walked away through the shadows, rather slowly and heavily, in her long white habit.

Renée beckoned to the dwarf, but he shook his head and hurried off by a side pathway, his face rippling with laughter. L'Oiselet's manhood had developed some mischief in him, as well as other talents.

The unnamed visitor, who had ridden up to the gate rather doubtfully, and was not even entirely reassured by meeting such an old friend, and being begged to wait till the royal messenger just arrived had been announced to Madame, was somewhat awed and puzzled when the dwarf, returning, led him across courts and down what seemed endless avenues, where the organ's rolling music pursued him solemnly. The stranger would have talked to l'Oiselet, would have asked where he was leading him, but in these mysterious precincts, all religious and dim, this cautious gliding through the deep shade of long dark alleys, talking seemed a difficulty. In fact, l'Oiselet laid his finger on his lip, shook his head, and would say nothing. At last they came to a place where frogs and nightingales made an odd, discordant chorus, and there, sitting on the stone edge of a large old fountain, poking among the wet leaves with a stick, was a girl, bareheaded, with dark locks in lovely disorder, and a face like a flower above her plain and severe black dress.

“Mademoiselle!” cried the ringing tones of l’Oiselet, and then, as she sprang to her feet—
“La voilà, monsieur!” he said to his companion, and gently withdrew into the shadow.

Renée stood with startled eyes and lips apart. She saw a grave, dignified, handsome young man in travelling dress, hat in hand, who bowed low, and then stood gazing with an incredulous, bewildered air. Was it really—no, impossible—this was a grown-up lady—then his fine blue eyes blazed suddenly, the wonder in them breaking into joy. She came to him lightly where he stood, still almost in the darkness of the lime alley, laughed, and held up both her arms, lifting her face to his with the most enchanting look, in its perfect innocence, that ever welcomed a lover.

“Nico—mon frère——”

Her face was hidden on the young soldier’s breast, while he strained her in his arms and covered her hair with kisses. A merry chuckle from the underwood did not disturb them. Renée quite forgot that she was grown up, till Nico’s kisses became too evidently not those of a brother. Then she tried to release herself, but it was not so easy. Both were laughing, his arm still round her, her two hands clasped in one of his, the dark and fair heads touching, while in a wild and happy and half-shy excitement they talked their childhood over again, when the Abbess returned after an absence that seemed to her long, and found them sitting in her alcove together.

For a few moments she stood motionless, looking at them, and they were not disturbed by her soft approach. The extraordinary sight—for a convent garden—did not horrify Madame Gabrielle, though it certainly startled her. She stood smiling, with tears in her dark eyes, with the King's letter in her hand. "And the vocation—ah, Renée!" she said to herself.

It was pretty, but it could not go on. "Monsieur d'Aumont!" she said aloud.

The young man looked up and saw the kind beautiful face under the black veil, with a certain sternness beneath the smile. In a moment he was at her feet, reverently kissing her ring—and Renée too was there.

"Madame—dear aunt—do you see him? You are not angry? It is my Nico, and we love each other—we always did, you know. And you will not make any marriage for me, dearest aunt, because I never, never——"

"Hush, Renée," said the Abbess. The sternness conquered now, for this was serious. "Be reasonable, or I shall send you at once to spend a week alone in a cell on bread and water. Rise, monsieur. I do not know what excuse you can make for yourself——"

"But it was all my fault," broke in Renée.

"Be silent. I have not forgotten, monsieur, my late cousin's affection for you, or that you were brought up with this young girl as brother and sister. I forget nothing. Otherwise, the very least I should do would be to have you con-

ducted out of the Abbey at once by my servants. And pray, how do you come to be here at all?"

"I was brought here, madame—to your presence, as I thought," Nicolas answered, with what dignity he might. "Pardon me—I forgot—the joy was too great——"

"I understand. You found yourself here by some mistake—which must never happen again—and you forgot, as she did, that Mademoiselle de Montaigle was no longer a child to be played with. However, monsieur, I might have expected you to remember all that she herself did not."

"It is true, madame," the young fellow said, and blushed.

He perceived that he had committed a tremendous breach of etiquette, and also that Madame de Fontevrault was treating both him and Renée with great gentleness. It was lucky, certainly, that she had not come upon the scene a little earlier. Renée hung her head, pouting, with tears of pride and rebellion in her eyes. They stood before the Abbess like two naughty children, to be lectured and brought back to propriety. Then a bell began to ring in the distance.

"Go, Renée," said the Abbess; and Nicolas watched his little love as she walked away without a word or a look.

And all the time a nightingale went on singing, but the charm of the garden was gone with Renée.

"Now, Monsieur le Chevalier," said the Ab-

bess, turning to Nicolas with her most gracious smile, "I am very happy to see you. I well remember that I invited you to visit me. Sit down there, and tell me what you have been doing since I saw you last."

Nico's story was a short and simple one. He had been on frontier duty, he had roughed it a good deal, had thoroughly enjoyed his soldier life under Luxembourg, and now that his regiment had returned to Saumur he was on his way to visit his guardian at Montaigle. Therefore he had ventured to present himself at Fontevrault.

The Abbess considered him thoughtfully. She had seldom seen a handsomer or a nobler-looking young man. The promise of his boyhood had been entirely fulfilled. And she, who had seen too much of courts and courtiers, admired with all her heart the simple manners of the soldier, who knew little of either.

"What a pity, Chevalier," she said kindly, "that you are not your own eldest brother, or at least a man of some estate and fortune."

"For one reason, madame, I regret it," said Nicolas.

"Your reason is the same as mine," she said. "However, we must accept things as they are, and with courage and self-control. Have you heard anything," she went on, after a moment's thought, "of a marriage that Monsieur de Montaigle is now arranging for Renée?"

"Nothing." Nicolas blushed up to his eyes.

“Neither had I, till an hour ago,” she said; “and it annoys me, as my brother the Duc de Vivonne has already proposed to me a young gentleman who seems likely to be an excellent match for her.”

“And who is it that my guardian——?” Nicolas began, and his eyes glowed dangerously.

“Not the old story again, I trust! Of late years I have heard little of those persons. But I think Monsieur de Vassy succeeded in disenchanting my good cousin. I have some confidence in him, and of course in the protection of God. But I know nothing, except what this letter tells me. When you arrived, I was receiving a messenger from his Majesty. Ah! was it l’Oiselet who brought you into the garden?”

“It was, madame—an old friend.”

“And an indiscreet one. However, no matter. I forgive him. Listen, Chevalier.”

In her soft full tones she read the King’s letter, Nicolas looking gloomily on the ground meanwhile:

“MADAME L’ABBESSE DE FONTEVRAULT,

“As a mark of my high esteem and affection for you, I consented some years ago to your taking charge, according to Madame her late mother’s desire, of the education of Mademoiselle de Montaigne. I understand that M. le Marquis de Montaigne is now arranging a suitable marriage for his daughter, to which I shall

give my consent, always provided that no religious vocation interferes. You will understand me if I say, with all reverence for yourself and your Order, that I should regret any such obstacle in the case of Mademoiselle de Montaigle. Have the kindness to place no difficulty in the way of her returning to her father's house. I have confidence in your good-will, and I know that your only desire will be to carry out my wishes in this matter. I commend myself to your prayers, and I pray God to have you, Madame l'Abbesse de Fontevrault, in His holy keeping.

“LOUIS.”

The Abbess paused. Her companion looked up, fixing his eyes on her anxiously, but said nothing.

“This letter is law, of course,” she said. “If my cousin de Montaigle sends for his daughter, she must go—but not alone. I must send some one to take charge of her—and who? That puzzles me.”

She spoke half to herself.

“Madame, I shall be there,” said Nicolas. The Abbess fairly laughed.

“Excellent, monsieur! You would be the perfection of a dame de compagnie. Do not be offended,” she added very kindly. “I have a good opinion of you, in spite of your little forgetfulness. Do you know, I have an ideal—I am an old-fashioned, romantic person. I believe it dates from days of chivalry, and much further

back than our Middle Ages—in fact from Plato, whom I have studied much, and who seems to me the type of human perfection. My ideal shows me a young man in your position, for instance, who holds himself superior to the temptations of his age and time. I can imagine him preserving a deep tenderness for a young girl he has known from her birth, and yet a perfect recognition of the insurmountable barrier which the circumstances of life have set up between them. In your position you can never hope to marry. But your loyal devotion—call it love, if you like, for it is indeed a high kind of love—may be of the utmost value to Renée; that is, if you have the strength to protect her against a foolish fancy for yourself, as well as against all kinds of danger from without. Is it too much for human nature, monsieur? Her dear mother, on her death-bed, wished that you had been in the place of Jean de Vassy. She trusted you as a boy; it would not surprise her that I am ready to trust you now. Yes—if I am to part with my Renée, to send her back to her father's house—though a *dame de compagnie* will be necessary—I shall be very glad to think that my ideal knight is there to guard her.”

Nicolas stood up suddenly. “You are right to warn me,” he muttered. “Yes, I adore her. I had better go back at once to my regiment.”

At that moment l'Oiselet appeared once more, flying upon the scene. “Madame—Madame la Comtesse de Saint-Gervais!”

CHAPTER XIII

“VIVE MONSIEUR NICO !”

THE wild and rapid clanging of the church bells and a crowd of staring peasants in the village street, welcomed back Mademoiselle de Mont-aigle to her father's house. For once the old château looked cheerful, even gay, its white towers rising on the hill out of a mass of May leaves, gold and green, pearly with chestnut blossom. And the great forest, which Renée had never feared, seemed to be rejoicing in its spring dress at her return—a beautiful, brilliant girl instead of a forlorn little child—one of these days to be lady of castle and forest too.

Renée sat in the coach beside her cousin Madame de Saint-Gervais, all kindness, flattery, and good-humour, even though Nicolas d'Aumont was riding near the window; and the sturdy horses tramped up and down hill, and the outriders pranced and clanked alongside. The girl's tears at leaving Fontevault had been some time in drying; but after all no young creature long imprisoned, even within the dearest of sheltering walls, could resist the beauty of that world of May—Anjou in May—the May

that justifies the poets: a wilderness of wild roses, honeysuckle, feathery golden broom, birds and frogs and insects rejoicing in chorus. The poplars with their young leaves glowed like great tall torches in the clear gold air and the setting sun, as the coach dashed through the village, the men whipping up their horses to full speed.

In the last shadows of the forest two men were standing, not far from the crucifix where Madame de Fontevrault had prayed for her dying cousin, but where this coach had not stopped, though the travellers crossed themselves as they passed it. These men were two of the forester brothers—Gars-cogne, more sulky than of old, Grand-Gui, more melancholy. They were dressed in their best velvet jackets, with the Marquis's arms embroidered on their belts, and were a pair of splendid and most discontented-looking fellows. Each carried a gun and a long knife.

“She did not look at us,” Gars-cogne growled. “They are all alike, these nobles. One gives them one's flesh and blood—ah!”

“She could not look both ways at once, you grunting pig. Didn't you see that Monsieur Nico was riding near the other window?”

“Was he? Was it Monsieur Nico, that officer? Well, he did not see us—they are all alike, I tell you—hang them all!”

“You lie—they are not. What likeness is there between Monsieur Nico and Monsieur Jean, I ask you!”

“Monsieur Jean is not there. I have not forgotten the last time—three years ago, was it? He struck me because he missed the boar, and told me I was a lumbering elephant. One of these days I shall kill him.”

“Take care. Agathe says that marriage is in their heads again: indeed it has never been out of them.”

“All the more reason for killing him. You, who thought so much of your old father—what did he say on his death-bed? May God save Montaigle from Saint-Gervais and all his tribe!”

“Very well. If it be God’s will, He will do it. By breaking God’s laws we shall not do it.”

“I suppose you want to save your skin, or why do you talk like Monsieur le Curé?”

“Come, fool — we have stood here long enough,” answered Grand-Gui, grimly smiling.

He stalked on and followed the coach, towering through the dust it had raised. Gars-cogne, still growling, turned back into the wood.

It was unwillingly enough, as one may guess, that the Abbess had given up her charge into the hands of Madame de Saint-Gervais. But different forces had been brought to bear, one after another, till their pressure was irresistible. First, the King’s letter. The well-being of the Fontevrault communities depended too much on his favour for his wishes to be set aside in any way. Then the arrival of Madame de Saint-Gervais in the Montaigle coach, with a retinue of the Marquis’s servants. She came as an

ambassador, bringing a letter from Monsieur de Montaigle to the Abbess; and this letter touched Madame Gabrielle's heart a little. The stiff father seemed to express a real wish to see his child again, to have her living at Montaigle, at least while his cousins were there. As to questions of the future, he went on, his daughter's inclinations should decide. “I have forgotten nothing.”

Then the Comtesse, apparently, was a much altered woman. She was full of polite speeches and devotion. The glory of her adored friend Madame de Maintenon, whose supreme cleverness and strength of will had made her the King's wife two years before, shone from her with a pleasant reflected light of power and prosperity. She could afford now to show every gracious attention, here following Madame de Maintenon's lead, to the vanquished house of Mortemart. She frankly told Madame de Fontevrault that the family wish as to Renée's marriage remained the same, but added reassuringly that her son had become a charming young man, to whom no young lady could have any personal objection. On the contrary, several delightful matches had been proposed for him at Versailles, and great disappointment had been caused by his father's declining them all, his heart being set on this alliance which would make Jean the head of his own family. Now that Madame de Saint-Gervais saw Renée once again, she was astonished at her grace and beauty. Her only

doubt was, had this sweet and holy atmosphere, this mother's love, these attractions of an earthly paradise which she herself so regretted never to have visited before, so hoped to visit often in the future—had all this laid such a hold on Renée that she could not leave it? In short, had she developed a vocation? Every one had thought this so extremely likely, such a natural end under the circumstances of Madame de Fontevrault's guardianship, that the doubt had found its way through Madame de Maintenon into King Louis's letter. The Comtesse had never been more relieved in her life than when Madame de Fontevrault said gravely and quietly, "No."

Then, the next day, the weight of two more letters was thrown into the same scale. Madame de Maintenon wrote to the Abbess, with whom she was always on the most courteous terms, praising the Saint-Gervais family as excellent Christians in these days when religion was threatened on every side, and repeating in plain words the King's wish that the great Montaigle inheritance should fall into hands so certain to use it well. Then last, not least, came a letter from the Duc de Vivonne, stating with regret that the King and Madame de Maintenon had made other arrangements for that young gentleman in the South who had seemed so desirable a match for Mademoiselle Renée.

And thus with a reluctant heart, haunted by the dying looks and words of her cousin Diane, quite disbelieving in the charms of Jean de Vassy,

but with a certain confidence that Diane's husband would keep his promise, the Abbess wished her weeping child good-bye, and said a few words of encouragement in her ear.

“Be brave, my Renée, do your duty, and remember that the doors of my house and of my heart are always open to you.”

It was not made clear to Renée what this duty might be, recommended to her earnestly and not without tears. Nothing special, apparently; only that “dry sort of thing” which was expected of all well brought up people.

In the meanwhile, Madame de Saint-Gervais was all kindness and pretty speeches; her open admiration was a rather pleasantly thrilling foretaste of life outside Fontevrault. And the fact that Nico was riding by the coach, the Comtesse having graciously accepted his escort, had a secret delight in it which made the sunshine brighter. He had a stupid way of staring straight at his horse's ears, so that Renée watched in vain from the coach window, when her companion was not talking to her, for a look and a smile; still he was there, and Madame de Saint-Gervais would have been startled, if she could have read the thoughts of the pretty head beside her.

“Remember the ideal,” had been the Abbess's last words to Nicolas d'Aumont, with the unforgettable smile of her race.

There was nothing sad in the arrival at Mont-aigle. The coach with its mounted escort dashed

in grand style up the hill from the bridge, servants and dogs hurrying out to meet it, a great clamour about the gates in the bright evening. The porter clanged back his tall iron gratings, easy work for his height and strength, hard for a smaller man. The Marquis had taken Joli-gars from the forest and given him charge of the gates, when Agathe came back from Fontevrault to marry him, five years since. As he had expected, she had found the convent world too much for her, especially as she had not full charge of her young lady. Now she lived happily with her tall Charlot over the gateway, and their two sunburnt, black-headed babies played in the courtyards. In this small household the old traditions were sacred. Only here and out in the forest, where Grand-Gui and Gars-cogne did the work of their father and his three sons, and talked of the dead Marquise as a saint in Paradise. All the rest of the establishment, outdoor and in, from Baudouin to the lowest scullion, worshipped the rising sun and obeyed the Saint-Gervais influence; the Comte, in his frequent visits to his lonely cousin, had taken care of that. Baudouin, inspired by him, stated as a fact that Monsieur le Vicomte would be the next master of Montaigle. As to the curse of the Marquise, as to the mysterious carrying off of her child—one could only shrug one's shoulders. The secret had been well kept; the mystery was as deep as ever, but the terror faded with time. And now at last it seemed as if the Comte's reso-

lute confidence was to be justified. Here was the castle full of guests ; all kinds of gay people invited by him, with the Marquis's consent, to spend a week or two of early summer among the green forests of Anjou. And the coach-door was opened, and from the broad step descended the little Comtesse, pale, vivid, smiling in her triumph ; and this girl with lovely dark eyes, with all her mother's grace, but with a touch of fire, of haughtiness mixed with sweetness, such as her sad and gentle mother had lacked, and with all the air of a great lady in her straight convent gown—this was the child whose dead brothers had left to her the future of old Montaigle.

Renée glanced quickly round as she followed Madame de Saint-Gervais into the hall. She saw a good many strange faces and a medley of bright colours, silk gowns, velvet coats, smiles and gaiety. She recognised the pale face of her cousin Alexandre, and curtsied in answer to his bow. Then a small dark figure came forward, and she quickened her steps, and curtsied again, very low, before her father, and bent to kiss his hand.

“Bonjour, ma fille!” said the tired voice of the Marquis, while a spasm of some momentary feeling convulsed his face ; he drew her close to him and kissed her forehead.

“Bonjour, monsieur!” said the girl, and added instantly, “Father, do you know that our Nico is here? He has come to visit you. He rode beside the coach all the way.”

There was a slight sensation in the hall, for the young lady's voice was clear and very audible.

"He is welcome. Where is he?" said the Marquis.

Nicolas came forward, rather grave and shy, under the encouragement of Renée's eyes and his guardian's outstretched hand. For a minute the three were standing together in the middle of the hall, while the guests smiled and stared and whispered a little, for the penniless chevalier, doomed to a single life, and the heiress of Mont-aigle, whose future was arranged, made certainly a most beautiful pair as they stood there.

Suddenly a voice from the doorway, over the heads of the thronging servants, cried out hoarsely — "Vive Monsieur Nico!"

CHAPTER XIV

HOW THEY DANCED

NICOLAS retired into the background, and kept himself there. It was not difficult, for he was naturally a grave and reserved young man, and no one at Montaigle followed the impolitic example set by that voice in the doorway in bringing him into notice. The Marquis did not interfere; he was himself little seen among the guests whom he had allowed his cousins to invite in honour of Renée's coming out of the convent. Madame de Saint-Gervais had represented how necessary it was that the girl should see and be seen. Renée's father did not refuse.

"Arrange it all as you please," he said. "Consider the house and the servants yours. Do all for my daughter that should be done. She has the misfortune to have a father who knows and cares for none of these things."

Madame de Saint-Gervais laughed merrily. "On the contrary, her father is perfection. Yes, dear cousin, trust me, and do not disturb yourself in the least. We will do everything," she said.

She dressed Renée in silks and satins from Paris ; had her dark hair arranged in a mass of curls and ringlets which showed off its natural beauty, hidden by the convent cap so long. She introduced her to two or three unmarried girls a little older than herself, lately come out into the world from other convents, shortly to be married, and beginning life with keen curiosity and enjoyment, full of dress, gossip, scandal and lively fun.

This little party of young girls made a pretty group apart in the gloomy halls and corridors of the old house. Renée, to whom all this new life was amusing and enchanting, took the lead amongst them easily. They went out to gather flowers, danced, played games, acted little plays and tableaux. Here Renée excelled, for acting was among the pet amusements of Fontevrault.

According to etiquette, the young girls kept apart from other people in their games and all their daily life. They were sharply watched by mothers, aunts, responsible cousins and friends ; but young men were kept carefully at a distance, or if they joined in games or dancing, it was in the stiffest and most guarded manner. However, young men were on this occasion scarce. Jean de Vassy was still absent. Madame de Saint-Gervais had not found it necessary to invite any one who might possibly become his rival, for her confidence in her cousin Montaigle was not altogether assured, and she perceived that Renée, not to mention her possessions, was a

prize that princes might envy. Therefore the only young men were penniless younger sons, who looked ornamental and made themselves useful like squires of old, and were too wise and well brought-up to be troubled with any mad ambitions. They looked on, behaving with the strictest good manners, Nicolas d'Aumont one of them. They chattered among themselves, and in this he did not share. He kept his thoughts to himself, watching the brilliant figure and face of his child-love, as she threw herself, seemingly rather forgetful of him, into all the new life around her.

Now and then he went for long expeditions in the forest with his old friend Grand-Gui. One day, returning from one of these, rather dismally thinking of things the forester had said, he came upon a party from the château just on the borders of the wood, gathering wild-flowers in a small meadow where the grass was growing long for hay. The girls, under the care of a governess who had come with them from Versailles, were making havoc of the grass, and trampling it down in all directions. Three or four servants grinned in the background. Farther off, the dark face of the peasant who owned the meadow, who saw his crop destroyed in this way and dared not remonstrate, scowled angrily through the trees.

"Shame!" Nico muttered to himself, pausing in the shade.

His own rather hard life had taught him some

consideration for other people; from childhood, too, the discontent of the peasants and the good reasons for it had fallen on generous ears, though hands were powerless for reform.

He stood quite still, listening to the laughter of the girls as it mingled with the sweet May singing of the birds in the wood. Magpies and jays watched them too, chattering among themselves, and all the warm air was full of the humming of bees in the great bushes of honeysuckle and the song of the crickets in the long grass. He was standing under an old half-decayed oak-tree, of which the lower boughs were near the ground. Suddenly a voice close to his shoulder said very low and sweetly, "Nico!" He pushed aside the leaves, and there, hidden from everybody, sat Mademoiselle Renée in a mossy fork of the tree.

"What are you angry about?" she said, for even at the sight of her Nicolas did not smile.

He coloured slightly. It was not his business, but he would tell her all the same.

"You did not think what you were doing," he said rather grimly, "when you brought your companions to destroy poor Jeannot's hay."

"Oh!" said the little lady with a touch of haughtiness—"surely we have a right to go where we please. Besides, we are not hurting the hay."

"Pardon! It will be twice as difficult to cut, and some of it is so trodden down that it will be spoilt altogether. Jeannot is a poor man."

"Ta, ta ! all the peasants here are very well off. They have no right to complain."

"Don't speak like that. They have heavy burdens to bear, and you need not add to them by your thoughtlessness."

"You are not too polite, sir."

"Forgive me. I am only speaking the truth."

He reddened up to his ears, and turned his head away. It was impossible to meet Renée's laughing eyes like a philosopher.

"Dear Nico, you really are a little stupid and rather disagreeable," she said softly. "You were much nicer when—" she stopped short. "I cannot imagine why you came to Montaigle. I was so pleased, and now—well, a tame bear would be pleasanter and more useful than you are, except to people like Jeannot."

"Méchante !" he said under his breath.

The old oak hung his leaves like a screen between the outer world and them. From where he stood close by Renée, in the tall undergrowth of tangling weeds, just where the forest broke off into the unfenced meadow, he could hardly see the laughing girls as they gathered flowers or Jeannot's angry face beyond. Sweet, sweet Renée, smiling down on him from her seat on the grey bough, in some ways as much a child as when he found her in the forest that magical autumn morning, long ago. How hard it was not to take her in his arms now after a different fashion ! She would not be angry, he knew. She loved him too in a way of her own, knowing

nothing of life beyond the walls of her convent. Instinct told her, of course, that he was not quite now the elder brother Nico—yet she would not be angry. Love and loyalty had a very hard tussle just then. The young soldier stood upright, with downcast eyes and fingers clenched. Renée watched him under her long lashes, her mouth curled in a mischievous but sweet little smile, and for a few moments there was silence.

“Give me your hand,” she said at last. “I must go back to them now. You are right, I suppose; you always used to be. Stay in the wood till we are gone, and I give you my word of honour, I will console Jeannot. Yes, I see him over there.”

“You are an angel,” Nico said, and they laughed in each other’s face as he helped her down from the tree.

A little later the peasant Jeannot was alone in his meadow, chinking certain gold crowns in his pocket. His face was still dark and scowling as he examined his trodden grass, though “Not so bad, after all!” were the words he muttered to himself.

On that Sunday the whole company from the château attended mass at the parish church. The Marquis, his daughter, and his distinguished guests sat in high places in the chancel, with much rustling of silks and clatter of swords. The village musicians, led by Pimboux the schoolmaster, trumpeted their best, and Made-

moiselle Renée herself made the quête, the Chevalier d'Aumont in attendance upon her. Among the congregation there was a good deal of smiling and whispering as these two young people made their rounds. It was not the first time: they had served together in the same way as children, on high festivals, under the loving eyes of Renée's mother. Now Madame de Saint-Gervais watched them sideways, and the corners of her mouth had a sour expression. She disliked everything that brought the handsome Nicolas forward, though she knew there was no real reason to be afraid of him.

After mass the villagers stood in groups, as they usually did, under the yews in the churchyard, and many of them had a smile and a word from Mademoiselle Renée, who remembered the old faces of her childhood. Grand-Gui the forester went down on one knee and kissed her hand, Gars-cogne's ugly face grinned, and Joligars wore his broadest smile, while Agathe and her children clung round the young mistress at home again. These people, her mother's foster-kindred, felt that she was especially their own. They too knew facts in her history quite hidden from the rest of the parish. But Renée felt herself the lady of all Montaigle, and all the grave dark faces of the peasants lighted up as she came near; and the women in their picturesque caps were ready to greet her with a laughing admiration full of pretty politeness. It was all, Mademoiselle Renée found, a rather pleasant and

amusing change from the grave discipline, the formal processions of Fontevrault.

Monsieur de Montaigle turned round at the churchyard steps, and there was a sudden silence while he said: "My friends, I shall see you all in the court of the château this afternoon."

There was a murmur of pleasure, for in his hermit life since the Marquise died he had entirely dropped this old friendly custom, which kept up some sort of feudal relationship between a noble and his neighbours. They looked after him with something like approval, unpopular as he had always been, while he and his guests slowly crossed the bridge in the white dust, and climbed the chestnut-shaded hill to the château.

In the clear light of the afternoon, under the old trees, in and out of sunshine and shadow, the great walls echoing back music and laughter, they danced with all their merry French hearts that day. Nobody was left out—even sulky Gars-cogne joined in the ring; dark Jeannot, the farmer, jumped as high and laughed as loud as anybody; all troubles and grievances were forgotten. Even the Marquis himself threaded the country-dance under Agathe's lively guidance; the Saint-Gervais cousins, all smiles, danced with anybody who came near; the visitors laughed to their hearts' content, and the gayest and richest of Renée's new friends made special choice of the solemn giant Grand-Gui as her partner. The young gentlemen flirted quite

openly with pretty peasant girls, but none of them was so much in request as Monsieur Nico. He might have had a dozen partners at once, and he did his duty like a man, though his eyes were always following one young figure about the green. The women, old and young, understood very well; they forgave him, and liked him the better for it, though after all they could not quite understand him.

“But there—there, Monsieur Nico—Mademoiselle is not dancing! Go, my boy—go and ask her!” friendly voices cried in his ear.

But Nico seemed deaf. He danced diligently, pale and grave among the light-hearted company; but he left Mademoiselle Renée to others.

As the shadows lengthened, more figures, unnoticed by many of the dancers, came from under the dark archway and took their places among them. Even Madame de Saint-Gervais was startled when her husband touched her arm, and she looked up to see a tall young man, all his strong white teeth showing in a broad smile, bending to kiss her hand. He was followed by two more young men with the same bold and dashing air, oddly mixed with extreme formality of manners, those manners which young courtiers wore like a coat to conceal their arrogance and fiercer passions in society. Such characters had had a freer outlet in the earlier days of King Louis; now hypocrisy was added to the list of Versailles merits.

Renée had just danced the round, touching

various hands in turn, mostly rough and toil-worn, when fingers of a different make suddenly caught and held hers, a plumed hat swept the ground, and strange lips touched her hand hastily; then there was a laughing stare under a fine wig of curls, and rather a pleasant voice speaking—

“Bonjour, ma cousine! Let me have the honour—my friends, the Comte de Bellefontaine, the Baron de Mancel.”

There was a rather different light in Renée's dark eyes, a flush on her cheek, a rather more erect holding of her pretty head, as she danced on under the eyes of these strangers, who had so suddenly brought a breath of the world, the Court, all that fairyland of adventure which she had dreamed of, into the old-fashioned revels of Montaigle. Her cousin Jean: she hardly remembered him, except as a great rude boy she used to avoid, a boy whom all the other young creatures about the château half hated and half feared, who could never play in a friendly fashion, but would always have his own way; a boy about whom Agathe used to tell her horrid stories, of whom l'Oiselet spoke with scorn, whose name Nico never mentioned if he could help it.

Of course, Renée now perceived, people were quite different when they were grown up. In old days Jean never took any notice of her, now his manners were very polite, and his looks expressed an admiration—a little too open, perhaps—but still an admiration, a respect, almost a

devotion ; how they bowed, he and his friends, treating her as the great and beautiful young lady she was, after all ! It certainly was a fine thing to have been at Court, to be properly educated, to know how to speak in society ; while poor Nico—ah, cruel Renée, had she forgotten the garden at Fontevrault ? It did not strike her then that Nico's manners were bad, that he did not know how to meet her again after long years ! But then, perhaps, she had not realised her own importance. The convent-bred girl in her black gown and slippery cap felt herself still a child. Even Nico, it was plain, knew the difference now, for he had retired into quite the opposite extreme of his first rapture. Nobody now could be more stupid, more shy, more cold. He seemed to find fault with his little friend, to shrink away from her, to criticise her from a distance. Where was the admiration that she had a right to expect ? Master Nico—there he was, yonder among the peasants, dancing as a log might have danced if you set it up on end, and never, it seemed, sending a look or thought towards her. Why could not he—a grown man, a soldier—show at least that he liked to see her there ; if he could not express himself with the air of cousin Jean and his two fine friends, Monsieur de Bellefontaine and Monsieur de Mancel !

And now she took Jean's hand in the dance, and smiled upon him with her dark eyes, looking lovelier than ever ; and then suddenly his gaze became so ardent that her eyes fell, and Mon-

sieur de Mancel whispered something to Monsieur de Bellefontaine. And when she looked up again, Nicolas was passing quite near, and his blue eyes, as they met hers, were sad and passionate as they had never been before.

The music played, and the dance went on into twilight. To those two or three who thought of the past, it seemed that all was forgotten, and Monsieur Jean easily triumphant.

CHAPTER XV

MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS

“If it be so,” Grand-Gui growled in his dark corner; then in a louder tone, “But it shall not be so! I will wring his neck first, or if I let him alone, Ga’cogne will do it.”

“Hush!” said Agathe quickly.

In her living-room, within the thick walls of the gateway tower, a smoky lamp was burning; and from the narrow slips of windows one could just see into a glory of white moonlight which flooded the courts of the château. The two children lay asleep in the bed against the wall, while Charlot’s wife and her brother-in-law discussed the affairs of the family.

Monsieur Jean and his friends had now been several days at Montaigle; long enough for the old servants to be convinced that his new Court manners were only a thin polish on his original brutality; but perhaps it was natural that Made-moiselle Renée did not realise this; how indeed should she, as the real Jean never appeared in her presence! The company of her cousin and his friends seemed anything but disagreeable to her; and sad old Montaigle was full of noise

and gaiety. The young people amused themselves well together, the elders looking on. Baudouin the steward had told Agathe that very day that the understanding between the Marquis and his cousins was now complete, that Mademoiselle would this evening be called upon to give her consent, and that the marriage would take place in a week or two.

What did Monsieur Nico think of it all? Agathe wondered. There was no knowing. He kept aloof as far as he could from the amusements of the others, spent long days in the forest with Grand-Gui and Gars-cogne, whose silent ways suited his mood. No one could fail to notice that his manners with Mademoiselle and her friends were of the stiffest. As to Jean de Vassy and himself, their faces darkened when their eyes met; but they never spoke to each other.

"If I were you, I should pick a quarrel with that boy and finish him," said the lively Baron de Mancel to his friend Jean. "He looks insolent; he may do you a mischief."

"I am not such a fool," answered de Vassy. "He can do me no harm, and the old father is fond of him. Some day, perhaps, I may show him his place, but not now."

That evening, after dinner, they had been dancing in the hall, and Jean, for the first time, had had a few words alone with his cousin; arranged for him by his mother, who watched anxiously in the background. He stammered

out a few broad compliments. It was not easy, he found, to say things to this untrained girl which had pleased various ladies at Versailles. There was something of criticism in the look with which she regarded him; and he drew back, a little nonplussed and rather angry. Well! he would teach her by-and-by to be thankful for a word of kindness. She was ignorant, with her small scornful airs, and neither so pretty nor so amusing as he had thought at first; a little black-eyed, unfledged creature from the convent, whom one must marry, of course, but whom no man of the world would trouble himself about for any other reason. Bellefontaine admired her, to be sure, talked of her distinction and the rest of it. Bellefontaine had queer notions; his taste and Jean's did not always agree. But the château, the estates, the diamonds, the name—about these, Renée's attributes, there could not be two opinions.

A message had been brought to Renée, before the dancing was over, that her father wished to see her in his library in half an hour's time. In the meanwhile, a strange sense of loneliness, a longing to speak to some one she could trust, a half-defined dread of all the gay company that surrounded her, had seized on Renée; she slipped from the hall, hurried down through the shadows to the gate-tower, climbed the narrow stairs to Agathe's abode, and stood rustling in pale satin, with strings of pearls round her neck and twisted in her hair, on the threshold of the dark little room.

Grand-Gui's threats were silenced just in time.

He and Agathe stared eagerly at their young mistress, he rising to his full height, grim and speechless, in the smoky corner. In another moment Agathe broke into an eager chatter of welcome.

"Yes, I was tired of dancing," Renée said. "I was hot, it is cool in the moonlight, and I wanted to know if your little Marie is better, Agathe. Yesterday you told me she was coughing."

Yes, the little angel was well and sleeping peacefully. Mademoiselle Renée advanced and peeped at the children. Then she turned and looked at her two faithful ones.

"Agathe, do you ever feel that you would like to run away?" she said.

"Never, mademoiselle."

"Ah! well, I am discontented, not happy like you. I cannot think why I am here. At Fontevrault we were all so safe; and here—I don't know, I can't tell—people seem to mean more than they say, though they say too much sometimes—some people, you know. How will it all end, I wonder! I would promise a reward to any one who would tell me."

"If we only knew what mademoiselle means," murmured Agathe, staring at her.

"Oh, you can't help, my poor Agathe. One must live one's life—do one's duty, as my aunt de Rochechouart would say. My father has sent for me, I am to be with him in half an hour. What has he got to say?"

“Mademoiselle does not know?”

Agathe started and exclaimed. Grand-Gui strode from his corner, knelt before his little lady and kissed her hand with devotion, then waited for an answer.

“How should I know, Grand-Gui?” Renée said, looking down into the dark imploring face. “If you will tell me, I shall owe you something. At any rate I shall have the truth.”

“Dear lady, every one knows, except yourself. Yes, I will tell you, and then, if you like, I will carry you away through the forest to Fontevrault. It would not be the first time——”

“Hush, hush, Gui, are you mad?” whispered Agathe.

But her mistress silenced her imperiously. “Go on,” she said to the forester. “First, the truth—and then I will give you your orders.”

“It is decided,” said Grand-Gui, still kneeling, “that Mademoiselle marries Monsieur le Vicomte. Every one knows it, except herself. And the marriage will be soon. That is what Monsieur le Marquis has to say.”

“Monsieur le Vicomte!” Renée repeated. She smiled, and blushed a little, while the two old servants stared in something like terror. “Well, well! every one must marry somebody,” she said. “He has very white teeth.”

“The teeth of a wild beast, yes, mademoiselle.”

“My good man, you are prejudiced.”

“Ask Monsieur Nico what he thinks of him!” cried Grand-Gui in despair.

“Es-tu bête, Gui!” gasped Agathe.

“Oh!” Mademoiselle Renée shrugged her shoulders, with a scornful little toss of her head. “Come now, tell me—you are safe with me, both of you—why do you hate Monsieur le Vicomte? He is certainly more agreeable than when he was younger, he is not ugly, he is of our family, and . . . if it is the wish of the family—well, what would you say if I became a nun at Fontevrault? If I do not marry, that must be the end of it. My aunt tells me I ought to marry, she herself has tried to arrange it. Come, will it not be better for Montaigle—for all of you—if I——?”

“Mademoiselle,” said Grand-Gui suddenly—“it would be impossible for Madame l’Abbesse to consent to *this* marriage. Madame la Marquise forbade it with her dying breath.”

The girl stood still, looking at him silently. All colour had fled, and her clear skin was even paler than usual. Grand-Gui saw that he had touched the right chord at last; the usually dumb creature, kneeling there at the girl’s feet, broke out into eloquence, and as he talked, the whole scene came back to her from half-forgotten childish days; she felt the thin hot hand caressing her brow and hair, she heard the weak voice from the pillow, saying things she could not understand. This thing, then, was forbidden by her dying mother. Was *this* the secret cause of a certain unreasoning antipathy, for which she had been half angry with herself, and against

which she had struggled a little whenever her tall, polite, apparently good-natured cousin came near? "I myself, with God's permission, will return to earth to prevent it." Had her mother's voice whispered in her ear, her mother's invisible hand been stretched between Jean and her?

Renée was a clear-headed young creature, not given to mysticism, rather inclined to believe in people's outside show. Why, she wondered, had her mother laid this restraining hand on her future? She could not have known much of Jean; he was almost a boy. And then—her aunt knew all this, why had she not told her, warned her? Was it the King's letter? *Mademoiselle de Montaigle* said very proudly to herself that neither King, father nor aunt would marry her against her own will.

But what wonderful stories *Grand-Gui* was telling now! He was certainly putting the necks of his whole family under the feet of a possibly future *Vicomtesse de Vassy*. First, stories of Jean's young days, his falseness, his cruelties, his lies and cowardlinesses, the well-earned hatred of a whole country-side for an evil-hearted, brutal-mannered, callously selfish young man; ending with his unprovoked ill-treatment of *l'Oiselet*, its scene and circumstances. Then, the *Montaigle* ghost story with its material explanation. *Joli-gars* figuring in the corridors; *Grand-Gui*'s own long arms carrying the little lady away into the forest, *Agathe* having care-

fully drugged her evening milk ; Monsieur Nico finding her——

“I remember all that,” Renée broke in impatiently. “But how did you come to play such tricks—how dared you !” and she laughed.

“We would have dared more than that for Madame la Marquise,” said Grand-Gui. “And I have now dared to trust our necks to Mademoiselle. No one but ourselves knows the story, except Madame l’Abbesse. L’Oiselet told her.”

“Poor l’Oiselet !” the girl said to herself. “Come with me, Agathe,” she added after a moment. “I must go first to the chapel, and then to my father.”

“Mademoiselle !” Grand-Gui still knelt, imploring something. He could not read his young mistress’s heart : he did not know if she was angry. Agathe stood by, all stiffened up with fear and consternation. There was a kind of hurried intensity in the girl’s face and manner which might mean anything.

“Poor friend !” Renée said. She bent for a moment towards her faithful servant, and her fingers touched the brown, furrowed brow. “My mother had indeed good brothers,” she said. “I thank you for all you have told me.”

It was a moment before she could rescue her hand, crushed hard against the rough lips of the forester.

There was no light in the chapel, except from the dim lamp that burned always before the altar. Agathe followed her young mistress in,

and knelt behind her there. Renée looked up at the altar, and down at the stone beneath which her mother lay. Ah, would she really protect her child at this crisis! How strong the world was, pressing in on all sides! What power they had, that crowd from Versailles, fierce, greedy, cold-hearted behind their smiles! And not one friend of her own rank to take a lonely girl's part against them all. Nico! she could hardly think of him now without an angry little pain at her heart. He might at least behave like the brother she had always called him. How had she offended him?

But these questions were unprofitable, pushing themselves as they did into the most sacred places; and the time was flying. In a few minutes more the Marquis's young daughter was hurrying, a white vision in the moonlight, up the tower stairs that led to his library. She was followed at a distance by Agathe and Grand-Gui, but they lingered below. On the landing of the stairs, in the light that poured in through a loop-hole window, stood the very Nico like a sentinel, like a young St. George or St. Michael on guard, fair and grave, his straight brow frowning and his face hard set, as if to bear coming pain. He bowed, but did not speak, as Renée came near, then took the lamp from her hand and set it on the window-sill. Evidently he meant her to pass on straight into her father's room; but he reckoned without his old playfellow. They had hardly spoken to each

other since that day when he found her sitting in the tree, but it had not occurred to him that she was hurt by his silence. With so much to interest her, why should she think of him at all?

Now his eyes fell before hers, first reproachful then laughing, though they looked suspiciously wet.

"Well, monsieur," she said, very low, "have you no compliment for me?"

"My best respects, mademoiselle," he said, and bowed again.

"You have the air of a martyr!" Renée murmured critically.

She had come close up to him, and suddenly laid her two hands on his shoulders. He stepped backwards with a little cry, and caught her wrists. There they stood, and for a whole minute could have heard their hearts beat; alone in the world, they two, with the great walls closing them in, and all the powers of earth against them.

"Nico, why are you so unkind?" the girl said at last, under her breath. He answered with a question—"Ah! You don't understand me?" and then flushed up as if even these words were treason.

"Think how alone I am!" she went on quickly. "How am I to save myself? I know now that my mother forbade it, but if not he, it will be somebody else. Nico, there is only one way——"

"What—what, Renée?"

"I must go back to Fontevrault and be a nun. Then I shall never, never see you again—do you hear?"

"One must die some day—and there are things worse than death! Yes, anything is better——"

"Must I do that, then? Tell me."

"Renée!"

There was a small bent figure standing in the doorway of the Marquis's room, and her name was thrice repeated before she heard it, waiting for Nico's answer with a passionate eagerness new to her young nature. In the confusion of her thoughts now, one thing alone seemed really terrible: a final parting with Nico. The talk of other girls had enlightened her on the real, practical aspect of a marriage in society. It meant freedom, she knew, of a kind; yes, of a kind; but this lurid light had not shone far into her heart, still innocent and young. To her aunt de Rochechouart, to Nico himself, she knew by instinct, such talk would have been odious. Must it then end in the cloister—or what?

Her father's voice broke in upon them, and saved Nico from an answer almost impossible to be given.

"Come in, Renée," said the Marquis. His voice was not angry, only very weary and sad. "Come in, you also, Nicolas," he added after an instant.

As they followed him into the dimly-lit depths of the library, Renée with a quick movement

slipped her hand into her friend's. He held it till the Marquis sat down in the great chair, and beckoned his daughter near him. Nicolas remained standing at the end of the table, and looked at the brilliant young figure; the folds of shining satin, the soft light of the pearls, the grace of the small head, now slightly bent in her father's presence. To Nicolas the moment was tragical enough, and he wondered that Renée could smile, for he was not vain enough to set down that sweet curl of the pretty mouth to his own credit.

"Does my daughter know why I have sent for her?" said the Marquis.

"Yes, father," she answered, every word distinct and clear. "You wish me to give my consent to a marriage with Jean de Vassy."

"I wish nothing of the kind," her father answered, with equal deliberation. "I ask, are you ready to marry your cousin? Evidently you are prepared—you know all that I can tell you. Ever since the death of your brothers the question of your future has been the torment of my life. I will not deny that this marriage with your cousin always seemed to me plainly pointed out by Providence till I began to suspect that I was mistaken. I have argued out the matter more than once, in this very room, with myself and others. But even if my own mind was changed, I could not quite resist the influence of my whole family, and lately of the King. I am incurably sick, sick at heart, and shall not live

long. I shall not have done my duty, if your future is not settled before I die. Madame de Fontevrault will grant me that at least, and she would hardly thank me——” he broke off, seeming to check himself suddenly.

“You mean, monsieur, that with your goodwill or against it, I must marry him?”

“No, I do not mean that. Things have gone so far that I cannot now draw back. For long I held to my plan in defiance of earth and heaven; and in spite of all, I cannot forswear myself now.” He looked down, and muttered under his breath, “If she knows—they judge fairly—she will be just to me.”

Renée stood motionless. Knowing so little of her father she was entirely at a loss to understand him. A great pity for him, however, rose in her heart; and her face was grave enough now as she gazed upon him.

“Do not distress yourself,” she said at last. “Your daughter must of course obey you.”

Nicolas started so violently that the table shook between them. She turned her head and looked towards him in the flickering candle-light; then motioned with her hand towards the bent, crushed figure in the chair. Strange words came from it; the two young people stood like statues, listening.

“I do not say, obey me. I ask, are you ready to marry your cousin?”

“But if you have given your word—if I cannot say No——” the girl stammered. She paused

then went on with a slight effort, "If your honour is engaged, then I have only to say that I am your daughter, monsieur."

The Marquis de Montaigle was very seldom seen to smile, but he smiled now, his worn stiff face relaxing suddenly.

"You are a Montaigle," he said. "I always thought so. You understand me, you know my motives; you see all the reasons that made me plan this marriage. Yes indeed, you are more reasonable than Madame de Fontevrault, and I thank you, child. But you have two parents, remember, and though one is in Paradise, she has already shown us that her wishes are not to be disregarded. Renée, you must have heard the story—you know it was your dead mother who prevented you from being carried away by my cousins and brought up as Jean's future wife at Versailles. I was never superstitious: but that story cannot be explained. Nicolas found you—but you have heard all this—indeed, you probably remember."

"I know the story," Renée said, looking down. "But my mother's words, when she was dying—I have heard of them too."

"In my ears they sound for ever," the Marquis said; "and more clearly, now that I hope soon to see that saint again, if God gives my poor soul so much grace. But to return to the immediate subject—your marriage. No, my child, I have bound myself to consent, but not you. My cousins know that very well. I told them that

your own inclination should decide, and I told the same to Madame de Fontevrault. Thus, I think, your mother will be contented. What then do you think of Jean de Vassy? For the third time, are you ready to marry him?"

"One question on my side," the girl said quickly. "What do you think of him yourself, monsieur?"

"I detest him," the Marquis answered coolly. "As a boy I despised him—as a man, I find him insupportable. And you?"

"And yet, monsieur, you could think of the possibility——" broke in the deep young voice of Nicolas.

"My poor boy, Jean is the only young man of the house of Montaigle," the Marquis replied quietly. "Now, Renée, your answer."

"It is this," the girl said. "If my mother had wished it, if your honour had been concerned in it, I would have married him, for my aunt says one must do one's duty—but otherwise, No. A thousand times No, my dear father. Look at me: I am kneeling at your feet. Let me go back to Fontevrault, take the veil, if I am worthy of it, and leave all your possessions to Jean, if you please. Then every one will be satisfied."

"No, no," the old man said, raising himself suddenly upright. "Montaigle is yours—yours—and Madame l'Abbesse is too honourable. Are there no other men in France, child, that you should bury yourself in a convent? I will not hear of such a sacrifice."

“Father! There is only one.”

Did he hear her? she never knew.

He fell back rather suddenly, sinking down in his chair; and with one trembling hand, while she held the other, he pointed across the room.

“Diane — Diane, you have your way. But these poor children—” he cried out.

Both Nicolas and Renée turned awestruck eyes in the same direction.

From a narrow, uncurtained window deep in the wall, there fell on the opposite wall and floor a long patch of ghostly moonlight, which indeed, to eyes and a brain weakened by sickness, might have been the transparent, spiritualised form of a woman. Certainly it was moonlight; but Nicolas d’Aumont always believed in his heart that his guardian saw, at that supreme moment, more than their eyes could see. After one glance he turned back towards the crouching figure in the chair, and in another moment he was supporting Monsieur de Montaigle tenderly in his arms.

“Renée—call somebody, send somebody—your father is ill—and dearest, do not come back, I implore you!”

For he saw that all was over; another *très haut et puissant seigneur* had followed in the long Montaigle line.

CHAPTER XVI

FUNERAL BELLS

So Renée came to her own.

Again the air was full of funeral bells, and many distant cousins and neighbours came to Montaigle to pay the last honours to the Marquis Mathieu. The Bishop of the diocese praised his many virtues in a long discourse which was compared to those of the great Bishop of Meaux. The peasants were indifferent; they had never loved him, and bore several special grudges against him; but neither did they love the more actively disagreeable rule of his Saint-Gervais cousins, who had not troubled themselves to gain much popularity outside the château itself.

While the Marquis lay in state in the great room where Madame Diane died, his watchers, full of superstitious recollections, trembling at every sound and shadow, the rest of the house was shut up in silent mourning. Renée hardly left her room: her cousin Alexandre took on himself the management of everything, and neither he nor his wife intruded themselves on the young girl, whose sorrow was very real.

Those last few moments with her father, their perfect understanding as to her marriage with Jean, her conviction that he loved Nico almost as a son, were a recollection of mixed happiness and pain. It seemed hard that he should have died just then, leaving her, so young, in a world not indulgent to the fancies of girls. And who was her guardian? No one knew, till the Marquis's notary should read his will after the funeral. But the Comte de Saint-Gervais, no doubt. He had himself no uneasiness on the subject. He gave orders as if he, or his son, was already the master of Montaigle. Renée heard of this through Agathe, and was indignant; yet her father's known loyalty to his family made her fear that her cousin was justified.

Most of the younger guests had at once left the château. Nicolas d'Aumont of course remained, as one of the family; but through those sad days Renée saw nothing of him. She suspected it to be his doing, however, that Agathe waited upon her constantly in place of Madame de Saint-Gervais's women, and that Grand-Gui slept every night on the staircase leading to her room. The Comte and Baudouin were angry at this, and the steward talked of ordering the fellow back to his work in the forest; but after all, the Comte shrugged his shoulders.

"Let him alone," he said. "Let them play at their little precautions; the game is in our hands now, Baudouin. Monsieur le Chevalier's orders, you think? Let him amuse himself."

Baudouin was not very sorry to obey. The forester might be ordered off, but would he go? and if not, who would make him?

Renée's first thought after her father's death was to send a letter to Madame de Fontevrault. There must be her refuge. Perhaps not always, for she did not forget that the Abbess, like her father, had treated that idea as impossible. But whoever her guardian might be, she would surely be permitted to go there during the months of mourning. Even the Saint-Gervais, when they knew her resolution as to the marriage, could hardly force her to remain with them. So Nicolas's groom rode off with the letter, and no one interfered. In consequence, Madame de Fontevrault sent her chapelaine and future successor, Madame Louise de Rochechouart de Mortemart, with two nuns, to carry consolation to Renée and to represent herself at the Marquis's funeral. She was ill, and could not leave her couch, with one of the painful rheumatic attacks which troubled her later years.

The joy of welcoming the Mère de Mortemart, young, loving, wise and gentle, so long her own little mother at the convent, was great enough to make Renée forget all the anxieties that beset her. She was no longer alone; it was as if her guardian angel had come in human form to protect her, and she listened patiently to all the spiritual comfort, all the excellent advice for this world, which her aunt de Rochechouart sent her by this means. Of course, for the present,

unless some higher authority intervened, she must come to Fontevrault; but she must not forget, in studying her own peace, that miles of country and hundreds of souls were now placed in her hands as mistress of Montaigle. She must think of their good even more than of her own. Such responsibilities could not be laid down in a cloister. As soon as a suitable husband could be found she must marry. Madame de Fontevrault had already written again to her brother, the Duc de Vivonne, a person of such large acquaintance in Court and country. It was difficult, of course, to find Mademoiselle de Montaigle's equal in fortune and position, but it must be done; it could and should be done. The Mère de Mortemart delivered these messages faithfully, while the tears ran down Renée's face like rain.

"Ah, mother," she said, "it is you who tell me all this—you, who would never have given your life to such things; you, in that peaceful Paradise, you come and tell me that I must stay outside."

"Dear," said Louise, "the good God did not make me heiress of all the Mortemarts!"

They were sitting together in the twilight. The windows were open, and far down in the garden the nightingales were singing. Down there the little Marquis used to pace for hours, his hands clasped behind him, his bent brows furrowed with thought. Now he lay quite still in the great room on the other side, walls hung

with black and silver, daylight shut out, tall wax candles burning round his coffin.

Renée had not yet told her cousin of the last talk with her father; she could hardly bear to speak of it, and some new shyness made it difficult to mention Nico's name. But now she felt that the Mère de Mortemart must know everything—the danger she had half escaped, the too great probability of finding herself under Saint-Gervais authority.

“You know,” she began, hesitating a little, “you know, mother, my family have a plan for me——”

A sudden stifled noise in the anteroom made her catch her breath and pause. She had a guard out there. L'Oiselet had prayed so hard to go to his little lady, to see his old master once more, that Madame de Fontevrault had sent him to Montaigle in attendance on the nuns. He had met again gladly his old friends the foresters and Agathe, the former conspirators; he had had a grasp of the hand from Monsieur Nico; and had once more brought his homage and his music to the feet of Mademoiselle. He did his best to avoid the rest of the household, for Baudouin scowled upon him, and Monsieur Jean, as wicked as ever and much older and wiser, was an object of fear and hatred to his former victim.

L'Oiselet was now sitting on a stool near the outer door of Mademoiselle Renée's apartment. His violin lay on his arm and he touched it now and then, holding as it were a little talk with it

in the twilight. Very pale in his black garments, his great spiritual eyes wide open, his clustering yellow locks streaming more thickly than ever, he looked like one of Carpaccio's boy musicians in attendance on Our Lady.

A rustle, a slight knock, and the door flew open. The Comtesse de Saint-Gervais in deep mourning, quick and abrupt in her movements, swept into the room.

"Mademoiselle is there?" she said; then sharply, "Why, it is the old dwarf! What are you doing here, little toad?"

"Madame," murmured l'Oiselet, "I came with the ladies from Fontevrault."

"Ah! I remember. You will go back with them then, and the sooner the better. Is Mademoiselle alone? But it does not matter. Announce me."

L'Oiselet obeyed, and returned sadly to his place by the door. Certainly Madame la Comtesse spoke as if she was mistress of everything, and from what his friends had told him, he feared she had a right to do so.

But her manner changed completely when she spoke to Renée and to Madame de Mortemart. It was all softness and kindness; and indeed, since she brought the young girl from Fontevrault, she had been unfailingly kind to her. Now she came full of sympathy to assure Renée how constantly she had thought of her through these painful days, so full of business and anxiety that she had not yet found time for a real and

affectionate talk with her. And now, "I thought I might find you alone, dear child, on this sad evening, and my heart longed to be with you, to comfort you. It is true sympathy, for you know very well that my husband and I were your honoured father's nearest and dearest relations and friends. We knew that noble, reserved nature as no one else knew it. His most secret wishes and intentions were not hidden from us : we took counsel together to the last. We shall never cease to regret not being there to receive his last commands. You, however, dear Renée——Pardon, madame, if I treat you as an intimate friend. Madame l'Abbesse would wish it, I know."

Louise de Rochechouart bowed gravely.

"Merci, madame, you are most amiable. You, dear Renée, received those last words which——"

"Nico and I," Renée said.

She lifted her pale face, and though she spoke low and gently, there was a curious warning light in the depths of her dark eyes. The faintest shadow of annoyance clouded her cousin's look for an instant, but passed almost before it was visible.

"Most fortunate, yes," she said rather quickly. "You were not alone, my poor child, and we ought to rejoice, for the shock would have been terrible. As it was, indeed—but I am compelled to ask an important question. Believe me, nothing less than necessity would make me intrude thus on your grief—but it is in your own interest.

Your father had time, had he not, to make the future clear to you—to speak, in short, of his arrangements for your marriage?”

Madame de Saint-Gervais trembled a little with excitement. Her bright eyes, fixed on the girl, seemed to read the very thoughts in her heart, and in spite of herself her colour deepened as she waited for an answer. Madame de Mortemart listened in equal anxiety of another kind: what was this that Renée had not told her? The old intrigue that her aunt had feared—was it then alive and formidable?

“Madame,” said Renée, “there can be no question of my marriage *now*!”

“My dear, do not fence with me—it is quite unnecessary, in the case of your best friend,” said the Comtesse patiently, but the sweetness in her voice was a little exaggerated. “Come, let us be plain with each other. There is no question, of course, of any immediate marriage. Let me put my question more clearly. Did your father tell you, Renée, that he had finally given his consent to the marriage which both he and we had planned for so many years—this marriage which will unite the two branches of the family and make it one of the greatest in France? I was writing the other day to Madame la Marquise de Maintenon, and I was glad to assure her, in speaking of this marriage, that it was what all religious and domestic persons must wish, a marriage of inclination. My son admires his sweet cousin; and I think, from what I have seen during

the last few weeks, that he is not altogether displeasing to her. Dear Renée, I see by your face that all this is no news to you. Come and embrace me, child! You will not find me such a bad mother, I assure you, *ma belle!*”

There were actual tears in the Comtesse's eyes as she stretched out her arms to the girl, who sat looking down, as pale as marble, and did not move or utter a word. The nun, a little apart, watched them both in anxious silence. Madame de Saint-Gervais bit her lips, flushed and paled; her hands dropped, and at last she said, “What does this mean?”

“Pardon me, madame, but is it not too soon to expect——” interposed the Mère de Mortemart.

“I think not, madame. These are not matters of childish sentiment. It is necessary that we, her guardians, should know whether Mademoiselle de Montaigle has received her father's commands. She will obey them, of course; but we must know that she is not in the dark about them.”

“Who is my guardian?” said Renée, suddenly looking up.

“My dear”—the Comtesse tried to smile—“for such a young girl you are curiously stiff-necked. Your cousin Saint-Gervais is your guardian. If you do not acknowledge my right to speak for him, send the dwarf to fetch him here. You will perhaps listen to him more courteously than to me.”

"Forgive me, I do not wish to be discourteous. As to my guardian, no one knows yet who he may be. My father's will decides that, I understand."

Renée got up, moved to the window, and stood there erect against the clear evening sky.

"You really make me impatient, with your splitting of straws. They teach argument at the Abbey of Fontevrault, I suppose," said the Comtesse with a slight laugh. "Be reasonable. What other guardian is possible for you? Believe me, I knew your father's mind. And as to the other matter—why do you pretend to be ignorant of it?"

"Madame, I pretend nothing. Yes, my dear father told me of that plan—made so long ago—and I have heard, too, my mother's opinion of it."

There was dead silence for a moment or two.

"Mischief-makers were sure to make use of that," said Madame de Saint-Gervais with a side glance at the Mère de Mortemart. "Your father was not foolish enough to be influenced by delirious cries on a death-bed. I was present, remember. Your poor mother was not in her right mind, whatever interested persons may have told you. Take my advice, and think no more of that old story."

Renée's dark eyes flashed with something—could it be laughter?

"Et puis—the ghost-story, madame?" she said very low.

Madame de Saint-Gervais hastily crossed herself.

"Ah, that I cannot explain," she said. "My husband has always suspected a trick. However, let us leave that subject—let the past take care of itself. If these things did not influence your father, how do they concern any one else?"

"Madame, they influenced him so far that he told me I was free to refuse this marriage that you press upon me. He told me that though he was himself bound in honour to consent, he had made it a condition that no force should be used with me. He asked me what was my wish, and I answered him. I told him I would not marry my cousin. I begged him to allow me to go back to Fontevrault."

"Ah, *that* I believe!" cried Madame de Saint-Gervais furiously. "*That* I might have expected, after these years of influence! A very happy plan for making Fontevrault the richest abbey in France. But it will fail—I assure you, it will fail. Your guardian will have something to say. He will appeal to the King, who no longer—no longer, remember—is under Mortemart authority."

"Madame, will you kindly remember——" the Mère Louise stood up in her turn, and the little Comtesse instantly collected herself.

"Pardon me," she said. "You personally are incapable of these intrigues."

"Merci—but I cannot hear the word 'intrigue'

mentioned in connection with my Superior. As to other insults——”

“Ah, bah! I apologise, madame. I am naturally rather angry. This wrong-headed girl—Mademoiselle, do not flatter yourself that the last word has been said. Who has ever heard of a child of sixteen arranging her whole life to please herself—refusing the marriage that all her relations had decided on ever since she was born! It is a simple absurdity. On thinking it over, I am not inclined to believe that your father showed such weakness—played us false in such a fashion. We knew it was a mere form when something was said about your inclinations. What business has a young girl with inclinations of her own? What! are your childish fancies to affect great estates and a great family? Impossible! Ridiculous! But I do not believe a word of it. Your father never said it. With his detestation of all that bore the name of Mortemart—pardon, madame, but I am speaking the plain truth to this child—was he likely to throw you into their arms? You have invented this nonsense, Renée; but it will do you no good. Take my warning; your silly fancies will alter nothing—nothing.”

“I did not learn to tell lies at the Abbey,” Renée said, and her air was so proud and stately that the Comtesse seemed to shrink before her. “But if you do not believe me, madame—if you want a witness, ask Nicolas d’Aumont. He was there and heard all.”

Her cousin did not now say, "most fortunate;" she laughed, such a bitter and evil laugh that the *Mère de Mortemart* gazed in horror.

"And no guardian of mine need fear," the girl went on, "that Fontevrault will receive me and my possessions. Yes, if I could take my own way, I would give myself and all I have for such a life of peace. But neither my father nor my aunt de Rochechouart would consent to that. I shall marry some day, I suppose, if I must; but I will take care that my marriage is good for Montaigle and for me."

"Really! I congratulate you," said Madame de Saint-Gervais. "And now let me suggest something. A person of your authority and power need not wait till an equal asks her in marriage. Like a queen, she can throw the handkerchief to whom she will—the lower the better, that he may not presume on his position. Why should not Mademoiselle de Montaigle, for instance, choose something as small as the Chevalier d'Aumont, an officer of dragoons, whose mother was—no one knows who!"

"Why not, indeed!" Renée said, her dark eyes blazing. "His mother was at least a happy woman, if his father was like him."

"Come, this is too much!" cried the Comtesse. "I must leave you; this agitation is too great for me, and the shock of finding nothing but cold-hearted ingratitude in the child I have all her life loved and treated as a daughter. But, I say again, do not flatter yourself, mademoiselle.

Your friends are not in power. My husband can bring pressure to bear upon his ward which is quite beyond your imagination. You are not a queen or a princess, after all ; you are a helpless young girl in the hands of your family. Come, do you really imagine that your refusal settles the matter ? Ah ! we shall see."

She flew out of the room like a creature possessed. L'Oiselet, white as death with the excitement of all he had heard—for the door had been ajar behind its hangings—had just time to scramble to his feet and to open the outer door.

Renée and the Mère Louise were left looking at each other.

"My Renée," the nun said, trembling a little, "you should not have answered so. It was not maidenly. Her insolence could not hurt Monsieur d'Aumont, and you should not have given her an excuse for saying that you feel any preference. The provocation, I know, was terrible, my poor child !"

"But I do, and they may all know it," Renée cried out. "I love him, and he loves me, my little Nico ! Oh, mother ! mother !"

"Hush, hush, you shock me !" exclaimed the Mère de Mortemart ; but a head of silky curls was hidden in her draperies, and she herself was young.

CHAPTER XVII

A STARTLING WILL

ALL Montaigle was breathless with expectation. Even the most ignorant peasant understood that his future depended in great measure on the will of the master who had been laid to sleep that day within the chapel walls, with solemn music and ceremony. When the funeral feast was over, and the less intimate guests had left the château, the people stood in groups, that lovely summer evening, about the gateways, on the chestnut-shaded hill from the bridge. Under the wild music of the bells, clanging out the funeral chime, the people chattered and wondered. Baudouin came down and tried to drive them away, speaking very roughly, with a stick in his hand; he, for his part, felt his authority assured. Monsieur le Comte and Monsieur le Vicomte could not do without him, who knew the history of every man, woman, and child on the estates, and had all the accounts at his fingers' ends.

But Gars-cogne the forester was there too, and he also had a stick, and when the steward came flourishing down he said to him, swinging it

gently, "You wish to interfere with us, Master Steward? Take care of your own head, I advise you. We are waiting to see you sent off, bag and baggage, counts, viscounts and all, by our young lady's guardian."

"And who may that be, as you are so wise?" demanded Baudouin with a grin; it was not advisable to quarrel openly with Gars-cogne.

"Why, Monsieur Nico, of course. Who else should it be?" growled the forester.

Everybody laughed.

"Don't deceive yourselves, good people," said Baudouin. "But you are not so foolish. As sure as I am standing here, Monsieur le Comte is Mademoiselle's guardian, and she will be married to Monsieur le Vicomte as soon as the mourning is over. Ah, canaille."

For Gars-cogne had stepped up to him, and with a touch as it seemed had laid him flat on the turf.

"As sure as you are lying there, Master Baudouin, that is a lie."

There was another burst of laughter, quickly checked; for after all, however strong in the arm Gars-cogne might be, it was only too possible that the real power would be on the steward's side. He scrambled up, swearing, and limped back towards the gate, leaving the people to themselves.

The family council met in the saloon, which opened from one end of the great hall. The elders sat stiffly in high-backed tapestry chairs,

the younger members on stools in the background: Renée's stool was placed next to Madame de Mortemart's chair, behind which stood the two nuns; Jean de Vassy stood behind his mother. The principal place was of course taken by the Comte de Saint-Gervais. The other elderly persons present, six gentlemen, were distant connections on the Montaigle side, Madame de Mortemart being the only representative of the Marquise's family. Monsieur Jean's two friends, rather to the indignation of some of the party, had stools near the door; here was also Nicolas d'Aumont, gloomy and sad in his black cloak. The old Curé was there, with a troubled face; the Abbess's chaplain from Fontevrault; the doctor, an old attendant of the family; and last, not least, the notary with his papers and parchments. He sat alone at a table in the middle of the room, and all eyes were bent on him. There was no change in his shrivelled face since the night when Madame Diane died. A wooden little man of law, all times of joy and sorrow were alike to him.

Outside the servants crowded in the hall, Grand-Gui and Joli-gars in some discontent that they were not admitted to the council. Were they not, so to speak, the uncles of Mademoiselle? Nearest to the door crouched l'Oiselet, under their strong protection. He was not ashamed to listen hard, in case any sound should find its way through the chinks; but the door was safely closed and curtained with tapestry within.

In a low, clear, monotonous voice the notary read out all the titles and designations of his late employer, the list of his estates and possessions, set forth at great length, and of so much importance that the eyes of Monsieur Jean, kept carefully down, glowed with anticipation. Jewels, plate, everything movable of value—the catalogue of these was also a long one. Then the Marquis stated that everything, his whole estate, his whole fortune, was left absolutely to his only daughter and heiress. There was no condition, except that masses should be perpetually said for the repose of his soul and that of his wife, Madame Diane de Grandseigne, Marquise de Montaigle, in the chapel where their bodies lay buried.

The notary paused. It was conveyed to the quicker brains among those present that something unexpected was in store for them. Certainly a strange thrill ran round the room while the little man settled his spectacles on his nose and cleared his throat slightly before proceeding in a somewhat louder tone. Madame de Saint-Gervais looked up at her husband, who was biting his lips and very pale. She clenched her slight hands together and fixed her eyes once more on the notary. Jean's thicker nature felt no fear, and he was smiling at his own thoughts. Nicolas could not resist a glance at Renée, and their eyes met across the room. The Baron de Mancel frowned, shook his head, and muttered a word between his teeth in the ear of his neighbour De Bellefontaine.

The notary's voice, though louder, was unmoved and monotonous as ever, as he read on :

“In the case of my dying, through the visitation of God's providence, while my daughter is still of tender age and unmarried, I entrust the care and guardianship of her person and estates to the honoured cousin of Madame her late mother, Madame Marie-Madeleine-Gabrielle de Rochechouart de Mortemart, Abbess of Fontevrault. I appoint this reverend lady guardian of my child, in the knowledge that such a step will be pleasing to Madame my late wife, and in complete confidence in her honourable wisdom. She will arrange a suitable marriage for my child, and will use no undue influence to induce her to enter the religious life. It is known that I had designed a marriage for my daughter with my cousin De Vassy de Montaigle ; but my desire is that in this matter, as in all else of the kind, she shall follow her own inclination. I have confidence in my daughter, that her duty to God and to me, and the great responsibility that is placed in her hands, will be the guiding considerations of her life. In this faith I give her my blessing.”

There was a dead silence. Saint-Gervais opened his mouth and shut it again. De Mancel made a frightful grimace, Jean stared into vacancy as if he understood nothing. The Comte half rose from his chair, but the notary lifted his hand, and he sat down again. More, then, of this wonderful document !

"I leave my sword to the Chevalier d'Aumont, formerly my ward, a brave soldier and an honourable gentleman. I give him my blessing."

"These last lines, messieurs et mesdames," said the reader sepulchrally, "were added by his lordship a few days before his much-to-be-lamented decease."

Again Renée looked across the room, but this time her Chevalier's eyes were bent upon the floor.

The atmosphere was electric. More than one person drew a breath of relief when Monsieur de Saint-Gervais broke the heavy silence suddenly. Only a little paler than usual, and perfectly composed, he rose from his chair and bowed to the Mère de Mortemart.

"My young cousin is fortunate," he said. "Pray assure Madame l'Abbesse de Fontevrault that I and my family are entirely at her service. With her leave we shall remain here a few days, awaiting her commands. You, madame, will perhaps wish to return at once to Fontevrault?"

"Yes, monsieur, to-morrow; and with your permission, Mademoiselle de Montaigle will accompany me. That would be my Superior's wish."

"Ah! no doubt," said the Comte. He turned his head, with one quick glance at Renée. Something, perhaps the half-bewildered gladness in the girl's face, made him smile; his smile was not pleasing. His wife, on the contrary, was furious to the point of losing her self-control.

"No, no," she was muttering. "Why should

you let her go ? What weakness ! Send to her precious guardian and let her fetch the girl herself. Why throw up the game like a coward—mon Dieu ! ”

As for Jean, he stood upright and motionless, his sullen face reddening and darkening slowly as the real state of things dawned more clearly upon him. That parchment lying there on the table, signed with careful characters by his old cousin Mathieu, himself now powerless and dead—that odious parchment, on which the little monkey of a notary was spreading out his thin claws—it held the ruin of all the fine prospects of his life. He had boasted and swaggered amongst other young men on the strength of a certain possession of the great Montaigle estates, combined with the headship of one of the most distinguished families in France. Could that parchment really deprive him of all ? He would tear it—burn it ! What devil could have possessed the wicked old cousin to make a hypocritical nun, a hateful Mortemart, guardian of his daughter ? It was true, he knew Renée’s own sentiments from his mother, who had reported them fully last night to him and his father ; but all three had been convinced that the guardianship would arrange all that. The girl once in their hands, it would be easy to use something a little stronger than ordinary persuasion ; therefore the knowledge that he was refused had not depressed Jean seriously. But now, this was quite a different thing.

While he brooded, his father was equal to the occasion. The council was breaking up, and no one could say that Monsieur de Saint-Gervais, as its natural head, had not behaved admirably. He had borne a severe shock; it was as if his cousin, reaching from the grave, had dealt him a sudden and tremendous box on the ear. But his manners were as courteous and cool as if nothing had happened. No person present could say that he failed in politeness. When the door was set open, and the guests filed out into the hall and dispersed, the wondering eyes out there would have discovered nothing from Comte Alexandre as he strolled along beside one of the elder cousins and talked in the subdued manner that befitted the day.

It was different with the Comtesse and Monsieur Jean. Their looks were so black that Baudouin, for one, stared in consternation. He was still stiff from the bruise he owed to Gars-cogne, but he had hastily brushed and smoothed himself, and had come in his usual sleekness to the hall. There he had found some slight satisfaction in bustling the foresters and l'Oiselet away from their places near the door. At such a place and time they could not very well resist the steward's authority; and Baudouin, cap in hand, stood nearest to the passing company.

Mademoiselle Renée and the Mère de Mortemart came out hand in hand with eyes cast down, and walked straight to the staircase; nothing was to be learnt from them. Here were Monsieur

Jean's two friends deep in talk, and as a strange contrast to the gravity of every one else, the Baron de Mancel was holding his sides in a fit of stifled laughter. They went out together into the courtyard. Then, after a moment's interval, Nicolas d'Aumont came into the hall alone.

Though most of the servants in their own interest had bowed down to the Saint-Gervais ascendant star, Nicolas kept his popularity among all but a few, and those the worst of them. The dislike between him and the steward was of very long standing; any boy brought up at Montaigle would have hated Baudouin, traitor, mischief-maker, tale-bearer. He was even more odious than fat, greedy, drunken Gobert, who spent most of his time in the cellar and the larder, and only came out to complain or tell lies. Gobert was not in the hall now; the funeral dinner had been too much for him. But though his ugly red face was absent, there was the pale visage of Baudouin, foremost of the little crowd into which Nicolas stepped from the saloon. Through a door that stood open beyond, a long rosy ray of evening sunshine fell on the young soldier's erect figure and his fair face, full of some new joy that seemed to transfigure it. He paused a moment on the threshold, looking at that waiting crowd. Suddenly the old beams echoed a deep-voiced exclamation, not altogether new to them—"Vive Monsieur Nico!"

Baudouin turned and scowled in the direction

of the voice. Some one else laughed, and the Chevalier himself was smiling.

"If Monsieur would tell us the meaning of all this——" Baudouin suggested, with an affected air of respect. "The Seigneur's will concerns us all, but we have heard nothing."

"Very true, Baudouin," said Nicolas; his voice shook a little. "My part is, that my guardian has left me his sword and his blessing."

"Vive Monsieur Nico!" three or four voices now took up the cry.

One, young, shrill and venturesome, dared to add very audibly, "And would give you his daughter in marriage!"

A kind of tumult rose in the hall. Baudouin stamped his foot with rage, then turned desperately on the young man. "If Monsieur le Chevalier would silence these evil-tongued fools—that wild savage Grand-Gui, that blundering ass Joli-gars, that little fiend of a dwarf, who has been let loose among us again for our sins—there might be a chance of hearing the truth. What would our masters say, I wonder, if they heard such scandal and loose speaking! One would think they ruled here no longer."

"One's thought would not be so far wrong, Baudouin," said Nicolas.

Neither he nor any one else took any notice of l'Oiselet's bold suggestion. "If you mean by 'our masters,'" he went on, "Monsieur de Saint-Gervais and Monsieur de Vassy. Mademoiselle's

guardian, appointed by her father's will, is the Abbess of Fontevrault."

The hall was filled with wild cries and exclamations. Baudouin rushed out, pursued by shouts from a few, led by the brothers Guillaume, of "Vive Fontevrault! Vive Mortemart! Vive Madame l'Abbesse! Vive Monsieur Nico! A bas Saint-Gervais! A bas Monsieur Jean!"

Nicolas had just calmed the uproar, which was increased by the presence of several of the Abbess's own men from Fontevrault, when Jean de Vassy's two friends, attracted by it, came back into the hall.

"What is all this hurly-burly, Chevalier?" said Monsieur de Mancel, laughing. "Are they congratulating you? Do they expect to be driven with a loose rein by the reverend Mothers of Fontevrault? What an arrangement, by all that's ridiculous!"

"It will be overturned, of course," drawled Monsieur de Bellefontaine.

"How can it be overturned, sir?" Nicolas asked, so abruptly that the young Comte's hand moved towards his sword.

"By the King's power, sir," he answered with equal shortness.

"Oh, come, if they wait for all your cursed formalities!" cried Monsieur de Mancel.

Nico remembered the words afterwards. At the time, not loving these gentlemen's company, he bowed and walked away.

As the Comte de Saint-Gervais grew older, it

had become more and more his rôle to pose as a philosopher. He had found it answer extremely well, both at Versailles and Montaigle, the two strangely different places where most of his life was spent. At Court, even in these more respectable days of Madame de Maintenon, it was an advantage to keep one's head cool, to smile cynically at the weaknesses and excitabilities of others, having none of one's own. And a character so calmly superior had a very fine and convincing effect on the cousin at Montaigle in his unworldliness. Such a man would think twice before suspecting the elegant, reasonable Alexandre of mercenary or ambitious motives.

But the trial of to-day was enough to upset the philosophy of Socrates himself. All his long exertions thrown away : all his family arrangements knocked on the head by the very man who had seemed to enter into them : a will in favour of the rival house of Mortemart, with nothing but a faint recommendation of a Saint-Gervais marriage, the bare chance of which was removed by such a guardianship. Truly, life seemed one long deception ; and it was without a smile, even a cynical one, that Monsieur de Saint-Gervais joined his wife and son after the family council.

"So—that affair is finished !" he said with a slight sigh.

"Madame—you hear him !" cried Jean, turning a crimson face to his mother.

"Finished ! By the will of a madman !"

exclaimed the Comtesse violently. "Bear witness, both of you: did I not always tell you that this wretched old Mathieu was mad? Who but a madman could be so deceitful? He led you to think that his whole heart was in it, while he was plotting this other frightful treason. Why, how he has lied to you! He promised you over and over again."

"Not precisely," the Comte said, shrugging his shoulders. "I depended too much, it seems, on his respect for his name. I took too little account of his prejudices and superstitions. From a boy he never liked Jean. And no wonder! who would? He would have swallowed the arrangement much more easily without Jean. Unfortunately, Jean was the necessary part of it. He was always haunted, more than you or I knew, probably, by the dying remarks of Madame la Marquise. He expected her to walk in at any moment, scattering curses and woes——"

Madame de Saint-Gervais started and crossed herself.

"Apparently," the Comte sneered, lifting his eyebrows, "we have no right to be astonished. To proceed: I fancy Mathieu had salved his conscience by saying to me, as he did, that he would not force his daughter's inclination. And after all, if he had lived, I think all would have been well. The young girl would in time have been brought to her senses."

"How could she say she did not like me!" exclaimed Jean indignantly. "She was ready

to dance with me. I told her that her eyes and her skin were beautiful, though I don't think so. I like a white skin and pink cheeks. I like a woman to be fat, and she is as thin as my stick. Bellefontaine said she was exquisite, and I told him he might have her if he would turn over the estates and the diamonds to me."

"The diamonds! The diamonds! To think that we have lost all!" groaned Madame de Saint-Gervais.

"When I was young, Vicomte," said her husband, "a gentleman who talked so of his intended wife would have been kicked into the kennel."

"Ah—you have always hated me," snarled Jean. "I believe this is your doing."

He glared at his father as if he would have liked to kill him. He, big, powerful, red and furious; Alexandre, slight, pale, delicate, sarcastic; they were the strangest contrast ever seen.

"Voyons! No more of this," cried the Comtesse. "You are both as mad as old Mathieu."

She flew upon Jean, and with her two small hands pushed him half across the room. Monsieur de Saint-Gervais laughed.

"Yes, Jean—I do not recommend any more mistakes," he said. "You must take lessons in the art of flattery, with a view to the next heiress—a white-skinned one, let us hope. However, to speak seriously, I see one glimmer of light in this affair."

“What—what?”

“It struck me very long ago, I remember, that if Mathieu played us false, we might represent that his brain was weak. Such a course would be much easier now that he is dead, and has left a will so extraordinary in its unreasonableness. I think that matters might be so represented that the will might be set aside, and that Mademoiselle Renée might become a ward of his Majesty. We need not now, I fancy, fear much from the Mortemart influence at Versailles. And then, that once managed, if Madame de Maintenon’s favour were secured for Jean——”

“That will be easy. She thinks him a very fine young man,” cried the Comtesse.

“Still, I recommend him discretion. At present we must bow to circumstances. The girl must go to Fontevrault, and we must return disappointed to Versailles.”

“If she goes to Fontevrault she will never leave it.”

“Ask his Majesty,” Alexandre replied to this, with his faint smile.

After a few more words, he left them to attend to the guests. Jean, lingering behind him, came close up to his mother and said, “Madame, I do not believe in this plan.”

“There is no other, my son, unless you take her away to-night and marry her in spite of every one.” She looked at Jean and laughed, half alarmed at her own words. “But that

would be wicked—and more, impossible,” she added hastily.”

At that moment some one scratched at the door, and Baudouin put in his head, more sleek than ever, with a cunning smile :

“Could Monsieur le Baron speak to Monsieur le Vicomte ? ”

“I am coming,” Jean answered. He stared hard in his mother’s face, muttered, “Remember, you said it ! ” and was gone.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT MIDNIGHT

ELEVEN o'clock, and a dark night ; the moon not yet up, and a sky covered with clouds. Grand-Gui lay full length in the bricked corridor, his head and arms on the lowest step of the stairs leading to Mademoiselle's room, and snored with the peacefulness of a good conscience and a mind at rest. With Joli-gars and Agathe he had been talking of the well-remembered night after Madame's funeral, when they had risked everything to rescue the child from her cousins. Now all was well. The Marquis's will had settled that, and to-morrow morning the Mère de Mortemart would carry off her charge to Fontevrault. The brothers agreed that they two, with Ga'cogne, would see the coach safe through the forest, just in case of any foul play at the last moment.

Agathe's little girl was ill and feverish that night, so that she could not sleep in Renée's room as usual, but a young waiting-maid from Fontevrault was there, and with her giant at the foot of the stairs and her dwarf in his old cell

close by, the mistress of Montaigle was well guarded.

Suddenly a lantern flashed in Grand-Gui's eyes, and he was shaken by the shoulder. He sat up, staring wildly. Baudouin's pale face was bending over him.

"Get up, forester: you are wanted."

"Who wants me?"

It was a suspicious growl.

"Stay where you are, if you choose, of course," said Baudouin. "If you like to neglect your own and your lady's business, it is your affair: you are too big to be managed by me. But the band of poachers from La Flèche is abroad; the forest is alive with them; they are driving all the game before them, while you lie grunting here. Guarding Mademoiselle? The château is full of her guards: besides which, twenty robbers could step over your long carcase without waking you."

"Who told you this?" stammered Grand-Gui, scrambling to his feet.

"Ga'cogne sent a fellow to Joli-gars, who was snoring too, while his poor wife nursed the child—I met him running down the court. A pretty porter—he can't forget his old work it seems. I told him I would find some one to keep the gate, and would warn you."

"Those La Flèche rascals—whereabouts, master steward, do you know? I thought we had given them a lesson last time. Ga'cogne killed two with his fists and the rest ran away."

"Perhaps they heard there were none but understrappers in the forest now. Ga'cogne alone against a hundred would be long odds. Towards the Coin des Larrons, I understood."

"The road to Fontevrault! Ah, by the Saints! we must have it clear and safe by to-morrow morning."

"It's true! You are a clever fellow, Grand-Gui. I had not thought of that. Ah! the ladies must not be frightened."

"I'll see to it," said Grand-Gui.

He shook himself like a great dog roused from sleep and strode off down the corridor. For once, Baudouin had done right in his eyes. He grinned as he thought that the steward meant to keep his place under the new régime. Baudouin also grinned, holding up the lantern to look after him. Then he too went away.

The voices, and the lights that flashed through the chinks of a crazy old door, woke l'Oiselet in his little room close by. When all was still and dark again he opened his door and crept out upon the staircase. He had heard the talk of the two men, and his mind was uneasy. To his nervous temperament the air was full of evil and danger, softly and sweetly as it breathed through a grated window just above. Owls were hooting, away in the park, a dreary and fateful sound in that midnight hour. The presentiment was so strong that he went back after a few minutes and dressed himself fully, hiding his little dagger under his black cloak; then came out again and mounted

the stone stairs noiselessly, till the last turn brought him within a few steps of Renée's door. There he sat down in a corner, determined to watch till day.

He had not been there long, and was still wide awake, when a ray of light struck the wall above him. A man, coming softly up with a lantern, suddenly turned the corner upon him, and started with an exclamation as he nearly fell over the dark bundle crouching there. L'Oiselet rose, clutching at his dagger, and for a moment the slender blade flashed out; but then he laughed and put it back, recognising the frightened face that confronted him. This was not Baudouin, or any one of the traitors who, for him, filled the Château de Montaigle. It was an honest little fellow named Michel, one of the Abbess's positions, who generally rode her off-leader. A rather puzzled soul was Michel, and growing old: he had served Madame Jeanne-Baptiste de Bourbon, and the Abbey of Fontevrault had no one more faithful, though some cleverer.

"Silence! You will wake Mademoiselle. What do you want at this time of night?" said l'Oiselet angrily.

"What! It is you? I thought they told me Grand-Gui slept on the stairs," murmured Michel, bewildered.

"If he had been there, my friend, you wouldn't have come so far as this," answered the dwarf. "He has been fetched to drive off poachers. In his place I would not have gone, I think. How-

ever, if the way is too long between your brains and your feet, you must sometimes blunder. I don't know—but that Baudouin is a liar—you have heard nothing of these poachers, Michel? I wonder, now—but what do you want?"

"That's just it—you chatter so, I can't tell you. What should I know about poachers? I am bringing a message from Madame de Mortemart."

"Why couldn't you say so at once, old donkey? Well?"

"I was to take it to Mademoiselle herself."

"Mademoiselle is asleep. You must first tell it to me. Then, if I find it necessary, I shall awaken Fanchon, who is there to-night in Agathe's place, and she will wake her mistress."

"But all that is too much delay, because she must be ready in half an hour."

"What do you mean?"

"On the stroke of midnight the coach will start for Fontevrault. Madame de Mortemart desires Mademoiselle to be ready and to join her in the lower court. You and Fanchon and some of our people are to follow with the baggage in the morning."

"And why not now?"

"Because it is dark, and I cannot guide both the coach and the waggon," replied Michel with dignity.

"In half an hour! Can it be possible?"

"Possible, mon petit, and also wise. So I thought, when they brought me the message. This is not the place to linger in too long. They

tell me"—he bent over the dwarf and whispered in his ear—"that Monsieur le Vicomte has laid a heavy wager with Monsieur le Baron de Mancel that he will marry Mademoiselle before the year is out. And you know as well as I, little bird, he is not the man to stick at trifles."

"Indeed, no," said l'Oiselet thoughtfully. "But this midnight start—you are sure you know the way? And these poaching bands in the forest——"

"The moon will be up soon; our men are armed. We don't fear a few poachers. Besides, if the foresters are about, as you say——"

"Ah, mon vieux, but they won't expect you. I wonder if it is wise?"

"But yes—to slip quietly off in the dark, while the whole château is asleep! Monsieur le Vicomte gets up in the morning—v'là, the pretty bird is flown. Come, come, we are wasting time. Knock at the door quickly."

Mademoiselle Renée was fast asleep on her broad pillows, smiling in her dreams, with long eyelashes still damp from the tears for that poor father who had so well shown his love for her, his reverence for her mother's memory. It seemed to her that she had only just fallen asleep when Fanchon woke her. In a few minutes she was ready to receive the Mère Louise's messenger, behind whom l'Oiselet crept into the room. His counsel was very soon called for. Mademoiselle Renée was angry. It did not at all suit her ideas of dig-

nity to steal out of her own castle at dead of night and escape like a fugitive through the forest. What could the dear Mother be thinking of? She questioned old Michel rather severely: had he seen the Mother himself? No: the message had been brought to him by Philippe, one of the other grooms, who had received it from one of the nuns, the Mère de la Roussière. Philippe was on his way to get the horses ready: the message was most urgent. Why did not the Mother de Mortemart come herself or send the nuns? Because the departure was to be secret, and the less they ran about the château the better. Where was Grand-Gui? L'Oiselet told her.

"What do you think of this?" she said to him. "Should I go? I am very angry. I detest these underhand ways. Yes, once was enough, l'Oiselet. I was a child then. What harm can come to me now that I am grown up, and my father's will is known?"

"Still, I do not think Mademoiselle is too safe here," l'Oiselet said rather doubtfully. "Madame la Comtesse will not willingly be beaten: they are all furious. If they could keep Mademoiselle away from Fontevrault they surely would; and it is possible that some report has reached Madame de Mortemart—that the coach will not be allowed to start to-morrow—or will be waylaid——"

"Yes, that is what I think," said Michel. "Our Mother de Mortemart is a wise young

lady, a true niece of Madame l'Abbesse, we always say."

The two stood looking at Renée. She stood there, still flushed with sleep, in the dim candle-light which made the high room only more cavernous. Fanchon had thrown a cloak round her, but the small white feet were bare and the dark curls streamed back in disorder. Not even l'Oiselet had ever seen his little lady so lovely. Since she had left the convent she had grown into a woman. Yesterday he had watched her with bewildered admiration: now, he would gladly have fallen down and kissed those feet on the cold uneven bricks of the floor.

The girl still hesitated, frowning and rather indignant.

"I hate to behave like a thief," she said.

"The thieves are on the other side of the question," murmured l'Oiselet.

"What could they do to me?"

"What could they not do, if they were wicked enough!"

"After all, l'Oiselet, they are my cousins, and not devils from hell," observed Renée, and she laughed.

"Mademoiselle is too kind. I thank her, in the name of Madame la Comtesse and Monsieur Jean."

"In the meanwhile time is being lost, and Mesdames and the coach will be waiting," exclaimed old Michel impatiently. "And I must go to help with the horses."

He went off without another word.

"One must follow, I suppose," said Renée. "Quick, Fanchon, I must be dressed at once. And you, l'Oiselet, go"—she stopped a moment, and the rosy flush, the light in her eyes, dwelt in her servant's memory—"go and call Monsieur le Chevalier. Ask him to come and guard us through the forest."

What becomes of secrecy, l'Oiselet thought, as he limped down the stairs, if people are to be fetched from the farthest corners of the château! She would end by spoiling all. However, there was no disobeying her—and what would Monsieur Nico say in the morning, to find that she was gone without his knowledge!

Dead stillness in the dark courts, not a light in any of the windows of tower or pavilion, just traceable in their ponderous whiteness against the cloudy and still moonless sky. Only down in the lower court, far below the archway where Agathe lived, waking ears might hear a slight jingling of chains, and now and then the clank, half smothered, of horses' feet on stones. But not the sound of a voice, which in that still night would have been clearly audible; and no light was to be seen. The Abbess's men were doing their work with dark lanterns, or by the sense of touch alone; the horses seemed to share their caution. Truly the Mère de Mortemart had made her arrangements well: she was, as Michel said, a wise young lady.

But now the question was, how to reach

Monsieur Nico and bring him down in time? He had kept his old room in the library tower, where he had always slept, as a boy, to be near his guardian and to act as his page when required. This tower was away on the other side of the large court, the cour d'honneur. The door at the foot of its staircase was generally open, several servants sleeping in the damp holes of the basement. To-night however, when l'Oiselet tried it gently, it was fast locked. Not daring to knock or make any noise, he stole back to the steps that led to the hall: a little side-door there might possibly be open; he knew its trick of old; and from the hall and the grand staircase a narrow passage with various doors and windings led to the library. As he approached this door it opened suddenly, so suddenly that he had only just time to step back into the deeper shadow of the wall. Two men, heavily cloaked, came out; it seemed to l'Oiselet that they were also masked. One of them turned back, locked the door and pulled out the key, which screeched its resentment. They went on, talking low, and l'Oiselet caught a few words.

“Easily. Philippe gags him, and ties him——”

Then a laugh, and they had disappeared in the darkness.

L'Oiselet, being quite unfamiliar with the present guests of the château, had no idea who these men might be. The voice, the walk, were

those of gentlemen. What were they doing, out and about at midnight? What did they say? Were they going down through the courtyards to spoil all? Had the plan been discovered? "Philippe!" Instantly light seemed to break on the youth's brain. Nobody ever trusted Philippe very far—Giraud's brother-in-law, the forester's enemy. There had been a talk of his leaving the Abbess's service, and though he still hung on at Fontevrault, he was always discontented, always boasting of the fine offers he had had from this or that grand seigneur.

"Oh, to be like other people!"

Never had l'Oiselet felt himself in such terrible difficulty as now. He could have sworn that this man Philippe, a clever fellow certainly, whom the Mère de Mortemart had trusted with her orders, had betrayed the plan, probably to Monsieur de Vassy. What would happen? He did not know. He had never been so bewildered, and the darkness made everything a thousand times worse and more confusing. Evidently he could not, through all these locked doors, reach Monsieur Nico without rousing the château. It was on the very stroke of midnight. He bethought himself of warning Madame de Mortemart that something might be wrong, and hurried, as fast as his crippled limbs would carry him, to a little gate which led from the cour d'honneur into a smaller court where the nuns' lodgings were. Had the reve-

rend Mothers gone down to their coach already? Who could tell! The gate was locked, and securely fastened with a chain.

Then the great bell began to toll out midnight, and l'Oiselet shuddered in the warm air as the owls hooted again, far off in the garden, and dogs, near and distant, began to bark and howl. Small and helpless, he stood at the foot of the towering walls and looked up to heaven. Dark there too; all dark, all motionless, and no human sound to be heard now, not even the jingle of a harness chain.

The words of those men returned upon l'Oiselet's brain. Evidently some project was on foot, some plan of violence. Who was to be gagged and tied? Would the coach be stopped? Would it even be allowed to start? Was Philippe really a traitor?

He limped down through the first archway, past the chapel, its loophole windows glimmering into the night. At the far end of the lower court, past the stable entrance, on the grass where overhanging trees made the darkness darker, two faint lights were flickering, and as he came near, walking noiselessly in the shadow, he could just trace the great ponderous mass of the coach between them. A horse moved and rattled his harness; a low, impatient voice said something.

L'Oiselet's keen senses told him that though he could not see them several men were there, on the left of the coach and about the horses.

He was also aware that the coach door on that side stood open. Evidently they were waiting: it seemed to l'Oiselet that neither the nuns nor Mademoiselle Renée were yet arrived. It was only a quite undefined feeling of something wrong that kept him from going forward and speaking to the men, even after he had crept up close to the back of the coach and had seen plainly that one of them, standing by the door, was certainly in the Abbess's livery. Then the same low voice, a grating, nervous voice, sounded again from the darkness: "Is she coming?" "Not yet," said another voice. "Patience!" and there was a smothered laugh.

By this time l'Oiselet had slipped round to the other side, raised himself on the step, and peered into the inside depths, dark but familiar. The coach was empty. As he stepped cautiously down again, the first voice said, "She is coming. Go and meet her. Say all is ready."

The light of a swaying lantern was coming down the court. Fanchon carried it, and was closely followed by her young mistress, wrapped up for a journey. The man by the coach-door hurried to meet them.

"It is Philippe, is it not?" said Renée, and her voice trembled a little, but not with fear. "Are we late? Is Madame de Mortemart waiting? Is the Chevalier d'Aumont here?"

"Mademoiselle, the reverend Mothers are in the coach. Monsieur le Chevalier has ridden on in advance," the man answered without hesitation.

L'Oiselet, at that moment, was hurrying forward to meet his little lady. He meant, he hardly knew why, to ask her to wait under the upper archway till Madame de Mortemart came; he meant also to beg that he might go with them in the coach. The strangest and most creepy feeling of distrust had laid hold upon him. Those voices—were they the voices of Madame de Fontevrault's men? Yet—if not—what did it all mean? Old Michel, who brought the message, was certainly honest as the day. It was impossible to see whether he was there among them.

Now, as he limped up the uneven slope, the lantern light dancing before his eyes, dazzling him, making him stumble more than ever, those two lies from Philippe's mouth smote upon his ear. He shouted suddenly—"Mademoiselle! Go back, go back! Treason!" He saw Renée stop short, but then was instantly aware of a man with a drawn sword running straight upon him, and heard a furious voice say, "That little demon! You fool, Baudouin, why did you leave him loose!"

Without the friendly darkness he could not have escaped. As it was, having better eyes than his pursuer, he dodged him across the court, rousing all the echoes of the old place with a series of yells for help, to which only the echoes replied. Finding himself close to the coach, he crept underneath it and waited there trembling for a moment or two, unseen by the men who

were busy catching greater game than himself. He heard a stifled cry from Renée, a scream from Fanchon instantly stopped. He nearly flew out with his dagger into the midst of the *mêlée*, but then quick prudence suggested that he would only be killed at once, and that his lady, now being carried by main force towards the coach-door, would be left among these wretches without a single defender. In the next moment, hardly knowing how he did it, he crawled out under the wheels, scrambled to the step, dived into the coach and hid himself under the broad seat, holding his breath, in pitchy darkness.

“What do you mean? Put me down! I command you, Jean, put me down, I will not go. What treason is this? Where is Madame de Mortemart?”

There was no fear in Renée’s voice, but a white heat of anger and pride that might have affected a braver if not a worse man than Jean de Vassy.

“Be still. I will do you no mischief,” he said: but with an irresistible strength of arm he pushed her into the farthest corner of the coach and held her there, while he leaned forward and spoke with set teeth to some one outside.

“Catch that devilish dwarf and hang him up,” he said. “He nearly spoiled all. If ever I see him alive again I’ll hang you. Shut the girl up till morning, and let her make no noise. My compliments to the Chevalier, and tell him to send me a wedding present. En avant!”

Certainly it was not old Michel who urged the Abbess's horses to such a break-neck speed down the hill, through the sleeping village, and dashed so recklessly into the black, haunted, midnight depths of the forest.

CHAPTER XIX

THE COACH

WITHIN the coach, as it jolted along, there was at first a breathless silence. Renée had shrunk away from her cousin into the farthest corner. Suddenly she sprang to the window and beat hard with her fists upon the glass, but it was too strong to be broken.

“Arrêtez ! arrêtez !” she shrieked. “I will not go ! I will not !”

“Take care; you will hurt your pretty hands,” Jean said quietly. Something in his voice recalled Renée to her dignity, almost forgotten for the moment. She looked towards him, but the lamps in front of the coach shed the faintest glimmer within, and she could only see a dark mass in the opposite corner.

“Do you hear me, Jean ?” she said. “Stop the coach this instant ! What does all this mean ? Where are you taking me ? I thought——”

Something choked her : for a moment, the terror and bewilderment of the situation were almost too much. “What coach is this ?” she said, with a desperate effort at self-control.

"You ought to know it," he answered. "You have travelled in it before."

"My aunt's coach! But how—where are the reverend Mothers? What have you done with them?"

"Nothing. They are asleep in their beds, I suppose."

"Indeed no—they are not. The Mère de Mortemart sent me a message to join her at midnight—she wished to leave Montaigle at once. Do you suppose I came down to meet—you?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle, I suppose no such thing," said Jean with a laugh; the scorn in her voice was rather stinging. "Now if I had been the dear friend Nicolas d'Aumont, whose escort you expected from what you said just now——"

"They said he had ridden on. They said the Mère de Mortemart was here. What does it all mean? Oh, what villainy is this! Oh, you shall be punished for this, cousin! What have you done!"

"I have taken possession of what belongs to me by right," he said. "Long years ago your father promised mine that we should marry. If in his dotage superstition was too much for him, and he was weak enough to listen to your fancies and also to make us powerless for the future, it did not follow that I should sit down and bear the disappointment. You said you would not marry me. I say you shall. This coach was to

carry you out of my reach to-morrow morning. I choose that it shall carry you in another direction."

Renée listened to this speech in silence. There was a touch of resolution, of reckless daring about it which oddly appealed to something within herself. Jean de Vassy was a horror to her; he was a bully and a villain; but he was a man of her own old race, a Montaigle after all. For a moment or two she kept silence, and then said: "They will overtake us. They will ride like the wind."

"Who? No one knows, except Baudouin and one or two trusty fellows."

"Oh, pardon! The reverend Mothers, Fanchon, l'Oiselet—if not Nicolas, for I sent him to call him."

"He did not call him. He was skirmishing about the coach—did not you see his yellow mop? He is hanged by this time. Baudouin has made short work of him—he knows me too well to disobey. I kill wasps when I can. As to your woman, she is locked up safe. So is that old fool of a groom who carried you the message. The reverend Mothers, as I tell you, are fast asleep in bed."

"Do you mean," said Renée slowly, "that the Mère de Mortemart sent me no message at all?"

"At last you see light," her cousin answered coolly. "A clever plan, was it not? De Mancel, who is now riding postilion in Michel's place, worked out the details of it: I mean to pay him

out of the Montaigle diamonds, n'est-ce pas! First we got those rascally foresters out of the way by spreading a report of a band of poachers, which they swallowed like greedy stupid fish. Then the fellow Philippe, who has been begging for years to enter my service, crammed old Michel with a message from your Mortemart lady, and tied him up, well gagged, when he came back from delivering it to you. De Mancel and I laughed to split our sides. De Bellefontaine had to shake us back into our senses. He wanted to come inside the coach with you and me, but I thought we should talk better without him."

"How dare you tell me all this!" said Renée.

The indignation in her voice was so deep that Jean hesitated a moment.

"I like you to know that I am in earnest, ma belle," he said. "None of your notaries and parchments will be of any use to you, now that you are in my hands. So you may as well make the best of it."

"Where then are you taking me?"

"To my own den—to Vassy, which I visit as seldom as I can—a rat-haunted old ruin. But there is a village *cure* who will do as I tell him and a chapel still used inside the walls. And I have my witnesses with me."

"And you imagine that when you have brought me to Vassy, I shall consent to marry you?"

"I do not imagine, belle cousine—I know."

"You are deceiving yourself. I would sooner die than marry you."

“Well,” he said—and laughed—“there are dungeons at Vassy, and not too much to eat there at the best of times.”

After this Renée was silent. All kinds of wild thoughts flew through her young head as the coach lurched and swung, dragged along at a pace for which it had never been built. It jerked violently into ruts and out of them; once or twice, only by clinging with both hands to the side Renée could save herself from being thrown right across it. She tried hard to think clearly, but the more she thought the more terrible the situation seemed. She was in the hands of an unscrupulous man, backed by two friends as bad as himself. She knew that Jean would stick at nothing to gain his end. Now she saw how weak, how fruitless, were a girl's own intentions as to disposing of her life when desperate people like Jean de Vassy and his mother—the Comtesse's looks and words returned to her very vividly—were resolved to lay their hands upon it. Then she wondered if, by signing a deed of gift of all her property, she could induce Jean to let her go. She would be as welcome poor as rich in the peace of Fontevrault. “What! give Montaigle to such a monster as this, to succeed my father! Dishonourable and faithless!” That thought was put aside. Another followed it; could she temporise with Jean? Some women, she knew by instinct, would save themselves in that way; would pretend to be softened, pretend to listen, and by their own cleverness, like De-

lilah, have their own way at last with the brute creature at their feet. But Renée was too young, too proud, too noble, to be one of these. If she had for a moment, in her ignorance, tolerated Jean's looks and manners, that moment was long gone by; and now she could not, if she would, dissemble her horror of him. For one thing she was thankful: that he spared her his odious admiration, and did not find love-making a necessary part of this adventure. His threats of dungeon and starvation were less dreadful than that would have been.

Perhaps, on reflection, he was a little ashamed of these, for when he spoke again it was in a milder tone.

"Be reasonable," he said. "Your resistance is absurd. Most women would prefer being carried off in spite of themselves. You know I am only hurrying matters on a little. Every one knows that your father was mad when he made that will and gave you that woman for a guardian. We are very sure that the King would set it aside at once. You would become a ward of the Crown, and my mother would soon persuade the Marquise de Maintenon that I was the right husband for you. So you see, mademoiselle, wherever you turn, there is no escape from me."

"Then why did you do this?"

"Oh, I was impatient. I could not see you taken away to-morrow morning to Fontevault before my eyes, perhaps with Nicolas riding by the window. Tell me now, Renée, why do you

like that solemn piece of monkery better than me?"

Renée was silent.

"I am taller, stronger, braver, better born," her cousin went on with increasing complacency. "I don't look like a sulky saint in a church window. Listen, Renée. When I admire a lady's eyes I tell her so, and if she scorns me I carry her off. Our ancestors would have done the same, I wager—only on horseback, not in a convent coach." He laughed suddenly, stretched a great hand across the darkness and caught one of Renée's. "There, ma belle, come a little nearer, and be reasonable. One marriage is not worse than another, and you see I must have Mont-aigle. Come, I am honest with you."

Renée freed her hand instantly, and without difficulty. It was a complication the less to feel very sure that *les beaux yeux de sa cassette*, and no others, were Jean's admiration; though, on the other hand, it might lessen her power over him.

"If I liked you I would not marry you," she said. "My mother forbade it with her dying breath."

"My mother says that was delirium. I do not, mind you. Bear me witness, I speak of the dead with respect—and you should not mention them at all at this hour. Yes—I know they say she carried you away once. Why does she not do something now—overturn the coach for instance? It would be easy——"

"You deserve it," Renée said. "Yes, in some way she will save me from you."

"I defy her," Jean muttered between his teeth: then crossed himself, frightened at his own words, remembering a vision he had once seen, and relapsed into sullen silence.

He was beginning to hate this girl, so coldly unapproachable, so fearless, though so entirely in his power. Well, once safely married, she would pay for all. Fine plans flitted through his brain. His wife might as well live shut up at Vassy—a little repair would make that possible—while he swaggered at Versailles and Paris, the rich Marquis de Montaigle. No lack of friends and flatterers then. Money and jewels for everybody; the keys to open all kinds of doors. Just this adventure to begin with—the abduction of an heiress—but nobody would punish him, as all right-minded people must see that he was only taking what lawfully belonged to him. Still, with all these pleasant reflections, the first excitement of success, the first pride in it and brutal good-humour, were dying down a little.

It was no longer quite so dark; the moon had risen; and though the night was cloudy, one could now faintly see the road and the trees wherever they did not meet too closely. The coach was now bumping along a grass drive, rutty and heavy, which cut across from the main road towards the northern edge of the forest. This was a wild part, without much underwood, but with sand-hills and groups of firs. Crowds

of rabbits, popping out with the moon, fled before the horses' thudding feet and the wide wheels of the ponderous coach that groaned behind them. The postilions still urged the horses to their greatest speed along this unaccustomed road, only meant for sportsmen and woodcutters. Up stole the moon behind the tall firs, and the low light shone in at the coach-window and showed Renée and Jean to each other. Even their hidden companion, half stifled in his black hole underneath, was aware that one terror at least, the terror of darkness, was withdrawn.

He lay quivering. What could he, miserable little creature, do to save Mademoiselle de Mont-aigle from a forced marriage with this ruffian! His brain, usually so clever and active, so full of ideas and expedients, refused to help him in this extremity. How could he, weak and helpless of body, stop the coach, get rid of Jean, escape his companions, guide Renée away into the depths of the forest and so at last to Fontevrault and safety? It would go hard with them, indeed, if they did not meet one or all of the forester brothers as they made their way across towards the Coin des Larrons. Ah, all this was a dream hard to realise; the coach still lumbered along, and soon the forest, friendly ground to him and his young mistress, would be left behind, and they would reach the high road presently, through a labyrinth of lanes, and be full on their way to Vassy, that den, as its owner truly called it, away in the wild lands of Maine.

Jean made a sudden impatient movement, kicked his foot backwards, and struck the dwarf in the face with his spurred heel. The sharp spike tore his cheek, and he almost cried out, but stopped himself just in time.

Jean leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and stared hard at Renée, who had withdrawn herself as far as possible into the corner, and sat upright, motionless. In the uncertain glimmer of the moon her face, white and fixed, could sometimes be seen as the coach lurched along. Her cousin's heavy jaw, his fierce eyes, the gleam of his white teeth in an angry smile, were only too visible to her.

"You had better make up your mind to it," he said roughly. "Nothing can save you. If you had consented at first, as any well-bred woman would have done, all this would have been spared. But that Abbess of yours brought you up badly, as we knew she would. If his Majesty had not written she would never have let you out of the convent. That was the Marquise de Maintenon's doing, to oblige my mother. The Abbess could do nothing. She has lost her influence now that the Montespan is cast off; and they say too that she is a Jansenist. Ah, you will see, she will be turned out of her abbey one of these days; and it was such a woman as this that your father pretended to make your guardian! Do you hear me? Answer."

"What am I to say?"

Renée's tone was cold, tired, and scornful.

Jean might have been merely a tiresome talker, who made this journey one long *ennui*. His smile became wider, more cruel, and he moved suddenly a few inches nearer to her.

"Come, mademoiselle, I am impatient," he said. "I am tired of your airs, do you see! Obey me at once. Say, 'I consent to marry you.'"

Renée waited a moment, then said, "Be good enough to stop the coach. I should like Monsieur de Bellefontaine to be here. He is a gentleman, at least."

Jean burst into a short laugh. "Ah yes, you know he admires you more than I do. You are a coquette, with those eyes of yours— Well, use them as you like when once you are married. No, I will not have Bellefontaine here now. You belong to me, and you are going to acknowledge it. Say what I told you."

He leaned forward and took hold of her arm. His heavy grasp was pain, but she gave no sign of that.

"Say it!" he repeated.

"Do not touch me," said Renée. "Take your hand away."

Almost to her astonishment he obeyed, let her arm go, and flung himself sulkily back into his own corner.

"As you know," she said, "I would rather die than marry you. I have told you that already."

"And after all," he said between his teeth, "that might simplify matters. After all, if you were dead, I should have Montaigle. My father

has said, before now, that it was a pity you did not follow your brothers. An ill-tempered little girl standing between me and my inheritance! Many men in my place would have had her poisoned, instead of proposing to marry her."

"Then France is full of murderers. But no, you do the world injustice. I only know one—yourself."

"Am I a murderer?"

"By your own showing. You ordered the poor dwarf to be hanged—a harmless creature who had done you no mischief. Poor l'Oiselet! I loved him. I suppose he is dead now."

"He was the most mischievous little demon ever let loose. He has been one of my worst enemies for years. One has a right to kill the creatures that sting one."

"I know you beat him once, and told a lie about it. That might have been enough for you."

"Take care, ma belle; do not provoke me too far with that tongue of yours, or I shall be dangerous. Yes, I know you loved the little brute. He is dead and strangled. I wish Nicolas d'Aumont was beside him—and if you lay there too I should not shed many tears. See, I have a long scarf here. Suppose it were twisted round that little neck of yours— Now, will you say the words I bid you?"

But as Jean spoke with his teeth set there arose something from the floor of the coach between his feet, something small, slender, marvellously active, and the moon shone on a wild shock of

yellow hair and a bleeding face, and flashed on the thin bright blade of a poniard. At first the young man was too much startled to do anything but stare helplessly at this apparition. A shrill voice cried : " Ah, strangled and dead ! Monsieur Jean ! strangled and dead ! "—an arm was lifted, and once, twice, three times, Jean was stabbed with l'Oiselet's little dagger before he could collect himself.

Renée flung herself forward, crying : " L'Oiselet ! Stop, stop ! You are killing him ! O God, what are you doing ? O Blessed Virgin, what horror ! "

But Jean burst into a fit of furious laughter. " Little devil, little devil ! " he cried. " Why, he is scratching me with a pin ! Give me that pin of yours—I'll use it ! " and swearing frightfully, he seized the dwarf and forced him down on the floor.

There followed a minute or two of violent struggling. Desperation gave l'Oiselet such strength that he was almost a match for Jean, but at last a long sobbing cry showed that he was too sorely hurt to fight more. Renée on her side tried to open the window, screaming for help, but with no avail. But Jean, having disabled his enemy, who lay groaning at his feet, tore open the window on his own side, and clutching the dwarf by his clothes, lifted and flung him out on the dark side of the road, just above a sand-pit, into which he rolled down instantly. As Jean did this, Renée caught sight

of l'Oiselet's dagger lying on the floor, and in an instant snatched it up and hid it, wet as it was, inside her dress.

What would Jean do next? He threw himself down on the seat, panting for breath.

"He has hurt me—I am bleeding!" he cried out, between oaths such as had never fallen on Renée's ears before. "Do you hear? Your little devil has killed me."

"Where are you hurt, Jean? Here is my handkerchief."

"What use is your handkerchief! All this is your doing. Ah, you shall pay for it. Call somebody! Stop the coach!"

Renée, pale and trembling, leaned out of the window into the night.

"Arrêtez, arrêtez!" she cried; and this time, with stumbling, plunging, prancing, Madame de Fontevrault's horses came to a stand.

CHAPTER XX

THE INN

LIGHTS were brought, and Jean's two friends mounted into the coach. They were much amazed at finding him wounded, not very seriously, but quite enough to make him helpless for the moment; one dagger thrust having pierced his left side and gone very near killing him on the spot. While Monsieur de Mancel examined and bound up the wounds, Monsieur de Bellefontaine handed Renée out of the coach. Both he and his friend had at once concluded that she, and no one else, had stabbed her cousin. "Diabliesse!" muttered De Mancel; but De Bellefontaine, with a romantic admiration for the little lady of Montaigle, felt sure that Jean had brought his punishment on himself by some personal rudeness, and took pains to treat Renée, as he waited with her on the roadside, with the most formal politeness.

"My dear, what impatience!" said De Mancel to Jean, in cheerful reproof. "The temptation was great, no doubt, but you were not wise. You should have waited to embrace your future

wife till you were safe at Vassy. You did not realise her state of mind. No doubt she was already angry with you."

"What are you talking about? Embrace the devil!"

"It was almost as dangerous, you will allow. This is a nasty cut. A good deal of strength in those slender little hands. I don't envy you, my dear De Vassy—even with the Montaigle diamonds."

Jean cried out impatiently. "You are hurting me! Leave me in peace, and send some one back along the road to look for the fiendish dwarf. I tried to kill him, but perhaps I did not. It does not matter though. He can die where he is, for I crippled him thoroughly."

"I am afraid you are dreadfully feverish, Jean. Dwarf! Do you mean that little animal from Fontevrault with the great eyes and yellow wig? We left him at Montaigle, don't you remember? You told the steward to hang him, which seemed unnecessary."

"What a fool you are," shrieked Jean, wrenching himself away from his amateur surgeon, whose attentions were the best part of his work.

"Allons! a few more of such remarks, and I leave you to bleed to death. Are you mad, De Vassy? On my word, you seem hardly fit to live, and I begin to admire Mademoiselle de Montaigle for trying to put an end to you."

"It is you who are mad. Where is she?"

"Quite quiet now, standing in the road, Belle-

fontaine in contemplation. When we get to Vassy, we must lock her up carefully, for you will be hardly in a state to be married to-morrow—or to-day, is it? and the young lady is a little dangerous.”

Jean burst out laughing. “Afraid of a girl, are you! Why, you talk as if she herself had flown upon me and stabbed me.”

“Who did, my friend, if she did not! You were alone together. We thought it was not quite the right thing, but you would have it so.”

This struck Jean as serious. It would not do for such a report as this to get abroad; a fine tale for his friends to laugh over with other friends, when they were back at Versailles, and a bad business if it reached the ears of King Louis and Madame de Maintenon. It was an act of daring, to run away with Renée de Montaigle and marry her in spite of everybody; it would have been a dastardly act, so to behave to her that she was forced in self-defence to stab him. He had been a little rough, certainly, but he had not really hurt or offended her, he thought, and he did not deserve such a slur upon his name. He meant the world, including his father, to look upon him by-and-by as a fine fellow.

“It was the dwarf, I tell you,” he said. “I suppose he was hidden under the seat here. Before I knew anything, he was on me like a wild cat. I assure you I had a sharp tussle before I got the better of him. Then I doubled

him up and threw him out of the window. I think he tumbled into a sand-pit. It cannot be more than a couple of hundred yards away. Send to look for him, De Mancel. If I had thought, he would have been better in a dungeon at Vassy. But perhaps he is dead already. As to Mademoiselle de Montaigle, let me advise you to hold your peace. We were talking quietly together when this little demon sprang upon me—and she offered me her handkerchief to staunch the bleeding.”

“Ah! I am enchanted to hear it,” said De Mancel. “There! I have done all I can for you, and now, as you say, we had better pick the creature up. Those monsters have nine lives, like cats. It is hardly safe to leave him loose in the forest.”

But though he went off without further parley, and despatched two men at once down the road to look for l’Oiselet, he was not yet convinced that De Vassy had not invented the story to save himself from disgrace. Was he clever enough? that seemed the only doubt. De Bellefontaine, to whom the Baron said a few words aside, was of the same opinion. Their idea was confirmed, when the men came back after a search of some minutes on both sides of the road, and declared that they could neither find the dwarf nor any trace of him.

Renée drew a breath of relief. She had been walking restlessly up and down in a patch of moonlight behind the coach, trying to see as far

as she could into the vague, shadowy, glimmering depths of woodland.

It was like her own life, this mysterious forest ; impossible to see far, or to find the way. But yet, if she could have escaped the vigilance of these guards of hers, she would have run away among the pines without a thought of the wild beasts and wilder men she might meet in those dim labyrinths.

Monsieur de Bellefontaine approached her respectfully, with a bow in the style of Versailles.

“Believe me, mademoiselle, we are desolated to inconvenience you. But our friend is now a little restored, and anxious to be away. We have still some distance to go.”

Renée, standing in the road, looked hard at the man who spoke. With much affectation, there was something about him not altogether evil. He was certainly the best of the three. She beckoned him a little nearer. He stepped cautiously forward.

“Monsieur,” she said, “I am not surprised at anything my cousin may do—he follows his nature and his traditions. But *you*—it astonishes me that *you* should take part in so cruel and cowardly a business.”

“For friendship’s sake, mademoiselle,” said Bellefontaine, with a smile and a flourish. “I have no pleasure in annoying you—on the contrary—but no man of spirit could bear to see such beauty and charm carried off to a convent. It was a fraud on our world that could not be

suffered, you see. If you now find our dear Vicomte a little rough, I flatter myself that you will forgive him—and all of us—when the affair is over.”

“You are mistaken. I shall never forgive him, or any of you. No human power will induce me to marry him. As I told him, I would rather die.”

“That would be a too terrible pity,” murmured Bellefontaine. “Ah, mademoiselle! if I were in my friend’s place, your stony heart should be melted by my devotion. Ah! I have a secret pain here—but I have sacrificed all to friendship. I knew too well that there was no hope for me.”

He had fallen on one knee in the sand, his fingers lightly pressing his heart. The girl looked at him wildly.

“Monsieur de Bellefontaine, you are a gentleman,” she said quickly. “Help me, let me escape. I will run away among the trees, and you can set them on a wrong track.”

“Mademoiselle—I adore you—but ask something possible,” exclaimed the young Comte, much agitated. “Unless indeed—unless you would promise me your exquisite self as a reward—then, my sword and my life are at your disposition.”

“Then this scandalous affair must go on,” Renée said coldly, and she began to walk towards the coach-door. “But it will have some terrible end, believe me.”

“Mademoiselle—fear nothing——” he stammered, following her.

“I have no fear,” she answered.

On again ; and now the glimmer of moonlight was fading before the dawn, the clouds were parting, and the sun would soon rise on another heavenly summer day. All the world was bathed in dew, the forest shone, new washed, refreshed by the coolness of the night. As they approached the open country, De Mancel still leading with merciless energy, the road became heavier and heavier. Just beyond the last scattered fir-trees, at the foot of sandy downs which later on would be purple with heather, the coach gave a last tremendous lurch and toppled over, throwing two or three men who were perched behind into the road. Two of the horses came down with a crash, kicking violently, and for a few minutes, in that desert place, all was clatter and confusion.

The Comte, with a word to De Mancel, had mounted after Renée into the coach, where Jean lay groaning without any notice of either of them. Renée, to her new companion’s surprise, looked at her cousin and said—“Are you better, Jean ?” to which he answered by a grunt. Then there was silence ; and Renée, turning away from Monsieur de Bellefontaine, had watched from the window with weary eyes the slow advance of day.

She thought of her poor l’Oiselet—dead or living ? and secretly clasped the little hero’s

dagger. Would God—would her aunt—be angry? There might be this way of escape—and this only. In the meanwhile, her prayers went up to a heaven that seemed to have forgotten her.

The accident was a sudden and unexpected joy. She was rather bruised in the banging and plunging and rocking of the coach, before the struggling horses were cut free. Then the upper door was wrenched open, and she was the first to stand on the road-side in the fresh morning, pale, tragic, dishevelled, while Jean was helped out with a good deal of trouble and swearing. A wheel had come off, and there was no means of setting the coach right again, till a smith could be fetched from somewhere—Jean himself, the only person familiar with this country-side, knew of none nearer than Vassy. A noisy argument went on, while Renée waited in silence. In the midst of it, Monsieur de Bellefontaine scrambled out of the coach with a long lock of yellow hair in his hand.

“What is this, De Vassy?” he said, dangling it in the sunshine.

“It is l’Oiselet’s hair. Give it to me,” said Renée.

“Do no such thing,” growled Jean. “Yes, I pulled it from his head, little wretch. You shall keep no such relics. Here!”

He snatched it from Bellefontaine, threw it down and ground it into the dust with his heel. But Renée stooped, picked it up, and shook the

dust off carefully, then twined it slowly round her wrist as the men looked on.

"If l'Oiselet is dead, he died for me," she said, "and as a relic I will keep it."

"Little murderer," Jean muttered. "You would be glad if he had killed me."

"Your life is not of much value to me, certainly," the girl answered scornfully. "But no; I am glad he did not kill you. You are not fit to die."

"So—the story is true," said De Mancel aside to his friend.

"I am glad of it. I could not bear the thought that those hands——"

"You are sentimental, my dear. But I wonder what became of the little monster. That gives me some uneasiness."

He looked back towards the forest suspiciously. It lay there, blue and deep beyond the sand-hills, stretching away to the southern horizon. No human sound came from it, the mists of the still morning lingered upon its velvet softness of outline. Who knew what pursuit might be hurrying even now through its shades, and Vassy was still leagues away.

All that could be done was to mount a man, and send him forward in search of a smith. Jean stamped with fury at his own disablement. The wound in his side persisted in bleeding, his left arm was also crippled; he could not possibly ride, or he would soon have carried off his prey on horseback, leaving the rest to follow as they

chose. Bellefontaine politely offered his services, with a side-glance at Renée. Should he have the honour of conducting Mademoiselle to the Château de Vassy?

"No," answered Jean, very gruffly; then he added—"No offence to you, but I would not trust my own brother, if I had one, in such a case."

"Bravo, Vicomte!" said Monsieur de Mancel, laughing and clapping his hands.

Jean remembered that there was an inn not far from this side of the forest, at a place where four roads met—or rather four of the deep lanes of the country, in winter often impassable. A cut-throat sort of place it was, a haunt of bad characters; but, as a shelter, better than nothing. Safer from pursuit than this foolish waiting here in the open road. Plenty of hiding-places, if necessary. The Marquis of Montaigle had nearly hanged the host more than once at his own door for smuggling, poaching, or worse crimes still. The host before him had actually hung in chains on a gibbet close by, and even now horses would not pass that corner without shying and trembling.

"Are you afraid?" Jean said to Renée.

"Why should I be afraid?" she answered. "The inn is mine, I suppose; the landlord is my servant. Let us go there at once. As to bad characters——"

A shrug of the slight shoulders, a movement of her hands, conveyed the girl's meaning plainly enough. De Mancel turned away to hide his

laughter. De Bellefontaine murmured "Adorable!" Jean stared sulkily. "Let us be off, then," he said.

They walked on down the rough road—Jean, Renée, De Bellefontaine, with two servants following. De Mancel and the others lingered to bring on the horses. They could only leave the disabled coach in the road.

It was not far to the inn. Jean dragged himself along, groaning considerably. Coming to the top of a steep hill, they saw roofs below them in the valley, near a stream which the direct road forded here. The rambling old wooden building was half-hidden by poplars. The inn was just beginning to light up its windows, and a half-dressed man, not long awake, was yawning and stretching himself at the door. Above him swung the sign, the *Chapeau Rouge*, with a portrait of Cardinal de Richelieu by a La Flèche artist. His Eminence had slept here once on one of his progresses through the west country.

The man came forward, staring and amazed, to meet these strange travellers as they descended the hill. Jean de Vassy with his slings and bandages, his clothes torn and stained with blood, his looks all impatient rage, was a repulsive figure enough. Renée, his unwilling companion, was a white slender ghost under her black hood; only the Comte de Bellefontaine retained anything of smartness, and the rough night travelling had affected even his dignified elegance.

"Here, you fellow—landlord—you know me," Jean called out as the man came near; a poor and sneaking specimen of his kind.

He cringed before the gentleman. Of course he knew him. He had seen him often, hunting, or on the road. Besides, he had been at the seigneur's funeral yesterday, like everybody else, but had hurried off afterwards, only staying for something to eat and drink, so as to get home before nightfall. Thus he knew not at all into whose hands the seigneur's power had descended, and was ready to lick the dust off Monsieur le Vicomte's boots. He stared open-mouthed from one to another. He did not recognise Renée, or Monsieur de Bellefontaine.

Jean stormed into the house, his companions following. The room was large, low and dark, furnished with stained tables and benches, and a great settle by the cavernous fireplace, where a pile of sticks was beginning to burn. Jean threw himself on the settle and called for wine. Renée walked across to the sunniest window, and stood there with her back to them. She was very still and calm. De Bellefontaine watched her narrowly, wondering what was in her mind.

"Listen to me, you staring ass," said Jean to the landlord. "My coach has broken down, and I have had an accident, as you see. Is there a smith nearer than Vassy?"

The man, very slowly, named another village, which Jean had forgotten. He swore at himself

for his stupidity, and at every one else for not reminding him, and letting him send a man and horse capering off as far as Vassy.

“Now, host, you are a cleverer fellow than I thought. At this place, what’s its name, one can have a priest and a doctor?”

The host looked again from one to another, and his jaw fell.

“These gentlemen are going to fight a duel? God forbid! I obey the laws. Indeed, monsieur, I cannot risk breaking them, even to please such an honourable personage. I have sailed too near the wind already, more than once in my life. I won’t risk hanging again.”

“What does the fool mean? I said nothing about fighting.”

“A doctor and a priest!”

“The doctor is to dress my hurts, booby, and the priest—you may know now, as well as afterwards—the priest is to marry me to that lady you see there. Send off some fellow on the spot to fetch the smith and them.”

“I have no one, monsieur,” panted the landlord bewildered. “My wife and her brother started at dawn for the market at La Flèche, and there is no one else here.”

“Then go yourself. Have you a horse?”

“One poor beast, Monsieur le Vicomte, and my wife has taken him.”

“Then go on foot, and run your fastest. If you are not back in an hour with all three of them, I will burn the house down.”

"An hour! Oh, impossible, monsieur," cried the unfortunate man. "I am old—my legs are weak——"

"Do you hear me? Another moment, and I throw this pistol at your head. Dolt! Leave us the keys of your larder and cellar, and be off with you."

The man slunk out of the room. Was ever wretched innkeeper in such a strait? But he was not quite so stupid as he seemed, and there was a cunning light in his eyes while he looked up and down the road outside and listened to the approaching tramp of the horses. Whatever the Vicomte might threaten, he had no idea of leaving his property at the mercy of him and his crew.

With the same dull and cringing manner he showed the Baron de Mancel into the house, and at his orders led the grooms and horses to the ruinous stables beyond. While the men were busy there, he beckoned Philippe, still wearing the Fontevrault livery, to speak with him.

"You are a servant of Madame l'Abbesse, and these are her horses," he said to him. "What does it mean? Monsieur le Vicomte has carried off a young girl, it seems, and talks of marrying her in my house. Has he been fighting for her? Is it an honest business? I thought they said he was to marry Mademoiselle le Marquis. I don't lend my house for nothing, mind you. I will be handsomely paid—but what

are you in these colours doing here? Explain it all—or I don't stir a step for any of you."

Philippe was ready to explain. De Mancel had conveyed a few dozen bottles of good wine from Montaigle, and the men had had quite enough to make them talkative. Therefore Philippe, with a swaggering air, gave the landlord to understand that his new master was not to be trifled with; that the young girl was a prize worth winning, being no less a personage than "Mademoiselle le Marquis" herself. That the seizure of the Abbess's coach was a splendid trick, and that every one who helped with the business would be paid with handfuls of gold. Ah! they thought the Vicomte could be shouldered out of the way as they chose! Mademoiselle refused him, Monsieur le Marquis insulted him and his parents by leaving the guardianship to Madame l'Abbesse. But he was a fine fellow. He would throw them all out of the window as he had thrown the dwarf, who hid in the coach and attacked him on the road.

"What? l'Oiselet?" muttered the landlord, who listened open-mouthed.

"We shall have roaring times, with Monsieur Jean master at Montaigle," Philippe went on. "He is a gentleman of the old school, that; not one of your milk-and-water, soft-spoken ones. He'll give you a blow one minute, and a louis d'or the next. That's the sort for me. Every one will be glad, except the foresters. As for me, I have helped in this affair partly to spite them."

“Aha! You are Giraud’s brother-in-law, I know. Well, I too have no reason to love these foresters. But come, we must obey orders. Which is the best runner among your fellows here?”

“But who are you, landlord? and how do you know Giraud? You are hardly the sort to be welcome at Fontevrault.”

“Anyhow, comrade, I am as honest as you. Never mind about me. Find me a runner. It is for your Vicomte’s work.”

The youngest of the grooms was called out and taken by the host into the back kitchen, where he gave him bread and meat, and a string of directions as to the way to find the village, which would have surprised any one who knew the country. When he was safely gone on this fool’s errand, the landlord slipped back into the large room.

Jean was sitting by the fire, drinking freely, talking to De Mancel; they were discussing something in an undertone. De Bellefontaine was stalking up and down the room, now and then approaching Renée and making some slight remark, or begging her courteously, for the twentieth time, to sit down and take some breakfast. His friends watched him, in the intervals of their talk, with mocking smiles; they left these amenities to him. Waste of breath, after all; for the girl stood motionless at the window, hardly answering, looking out into that summer world of freedom and beauty where

birds were singing, bees humming, and butterflies flitting over the flowers; for there were flowers, even about the dark walls of the *Chapeau Rouge*. Renée gazed out into the sunshine, with fixed eyes and quiet lips. That priest who was coming: she would make her last appeal to him: and if he dared—or, rather, was coward enough—to take Jean's part in the matter—why then—the dagger's little hilt was warm in her bosom, felt friendly to the fingers that caressed it there.

With bows and apologies, the landlord explained to Jean that he had found a man to do his errand, a young man, with longer and better legs than his own. Jean grunted carelessly. So that the smith, the priest and the doctor were brought, what did it matter who fetched them! Then the landlord squinted round the room with his cunning eyes, which somehow, half closed as they were, redeemed the stupidity of his face. Sidling along by the tables, he came near the window where Renée was standing. She took no notice of him till he was close to her elbow, and till the Comte de Bellefontaine, on the other side, said, "What is it, fellow?" Then she looked at the man.

"My wife is not here," he mumbled. "But if this lady would like to repose herself in one of our rooms upstairs, we have a well-furnished guest-room——"

"I will," said Renée. "Show me the way."

De Bellefontaine stepped back with a bow

as she passed him. De Mancel also rose, with a grimace at Jean, who called out, as the landlord led the way to the staircase—"Lock the door, fellow, and bring me the key."

"Without fail, monsieur," answered the low frightened voice.

The stairs were very dark and evil-smelling; they creaked alarmingly, even under Renée's light tread. Was she doing right in allowing this man, who bore as bad a character as his house, to lead her thus into its darker recesses? Anything, to escape from those three below, by courtesy called noble.

A narrow black passage led from the stairs to the low crazy door of a room. Her guide opened it, and descended two steps to the dirty, uneven floor. Two windows were shuttered against the sun. There were three large beds, grimy in appearance, with curtains and coverlets of coarse green baize; a table and two arm-chairs which had seen better days; a high cupboard with brass handles on which a ray of light flashed; some mysterious-looking bundles piled in a corner. The smell of the room was oppressive; and under its low black beams there seemed to hover a presence of evil, so that Renée, young, pure and brave, shuddered a little as she entered it.

She looked at the man, who lingered a moment before shutting the door. He was an unattractive creature, certainly; yet there was something in his face which made her speak to him.

“Do you know who I am?” she said; “and that a crime has been committed?”

He bowed very low and laid his finger on his lip, but whispered hoarsely, keeping watchful eyes upon her—“My service to mademoiselle—but I am alone here.”

“That priest——” she began.

He shook his head violently, and signed towards the stairs, which were creaking.

“Rest yourself,” he said, and slipped out of the room; the key screeched in the rusty lock, and Renée was a prisoner and alone.

The hours went on; the sun moved slowly up the sky. From her barred windows she could see nothing, and the sounds below had all died away. For some time she walked restlessly up and down, expecting every moment to hear voices or steps outside the door. She felt no hunger, though she had fasted for so long. It seemed as if the slow hours must have reached noon, when, sitting in one of the chairs, white and weary, and gradually overcome with sleep in that heavy air, she saw the wardrobe door open slowly before her eyes, where it stood between the windows. The landlord’s head was projected cautiously into the room.

“Mademoiselle—hush, take care——” he whispered. “They are asleep—I have a horse below——”

CHAPTER XXI

“ADIEU, MON BRAVE!”

THE Chevalier d'Aumont rose joyfully that morning, and dressed himself with special care. His own prospects indeed were no brighter than before. A poor soldier he was likely to remain. His guardian's sword and blessing were legacies which did him no good in a worldly point of view. His half-brothers, finished courtiers at Versailles, almost ignored his existence, and had not even troubled themselves to help him into the Order of Malta, that dignified refuge for younger sons. There was nothing for him but to gain distinction as a soldier, to be one day, as l'Oiselet had said, a Marshal of France. Plenty of scope for these ambitions under Louis XIV.

The Abbess had known very well to whom she addressed herself, when she set her high Platonic ideal before young D'Aumont's imagination. The boy's thoughts had always been romantic and chivalrous. He was what his father had been before him, and what his brothers were not, a man of an earlier time. It might

he said that he was a hero of Corneille, rather than of Racine. Simple, matter-of-fact, neither quick nor brilliant, he was essentially noble. As the Abbess guessed, he was one of those rare natures which are capable of unselfish love, and can be happy in giving themselves without reward. Now that he believed Renée to be free for ever from Saint-Gervais influence and safe under Madame Gabrielle's guardianship, a great weight was lifted from his spirits. Of course, some day, she would marry some one else; that seemed an inevitable thing, as sure as that she must some day die:—but still, Madame l'Abbesse would take care that it was well with her.

“She does not really know what love is, my sweet,” he thought, “and perhaps she never will.”

He prepared himself joyfully to ride with the Fontevault coach that morning through the forest. With himself and the foresters to guard it, he did not think that any attempt would be made to stop it. The Saint-Gervais could have no present excuse for setting aside Monsieur de Montaigle's will: as to dark threats of appealing to King Louis in the future, they did not greatly trouble him. The Abbess would know how to arrange all that.

Coming out of his room in the early morning, on the tower stairs which led down to the courtyard and up to the library, he was surprised at hearing sounds above; low voices talking, and the moving of heavy weights. Who were these,

in the Marquis's room at this hour, and what business had they there? Still his old guardian's page, Nicolas leaped noiselessly up to the door and tried the latch. The door was locked within.

"Who is there? What are you doing?" he called out.

There was silence, and then a hasty scuffling.

"Thieves! and the treasure is there!" he said to himself, and shook the door violently.

"Open this moment, or I call men to break in the door!"

"Open to the fool, then!" cried a shrill, angry voice.

It was Baudouin who obeyed. Paler than usual, grinning nervously, he skulked behind the door out of the Chevalier's way. It was Madame de Saint-Gervais, deathly pale, with shining eyes, the image of fury, who confronted Nicolas as he walked into the room. The narrow door by the fireplace stood open behind her. On the table were three or four boxes, one of them open, and a heap of diamond ornaments, some of the magnificent heirlooms of Montaigle, lay flashing beside it: the sun, still low in the east, shone straight upon them through the nearest window.

"Baudouin," said the Comtesse, before Nicolas could speak, "go and fetch help. If you were half a man, you would fling that boy back into his room on the way, and bolt the door upon him."

“Madame—I am not a soldier——” the steward stammered.

“No,” said Nicolas, “you are only a thief. I am sorry to soil my fingers by touching you.”

He had not lived near Ga’cogne and Joli-Gars for nothing. A hand on Baudouin’s collar brought him to his knees, and there he remained. Still holding him, Nicolas bowed to the Comtesse.

“Madame, will you have the goodness to explain——”

“And what right have you to ask for an explanation?”

“None perhaps legally—but while I am here, no unauthorised person will tamper with the treasure. You will be good enough to restore those diamonds——”

“Not at your orders, Monsieur le Chevalier. You really seem to think yourself somebody.”

“I shall be throttled,” muttered Baudouin.

“Let the man go,” cried Madame de Saint-Gervais. “How can you treat a faithful servant so! And how dare you attack me, a relation of the family, of which you are merely a dependant, as if I had any evil design on these diamonds?”

“What is your design, madame?” said Nicolas, unmoved.

“I mean to remove them from this house, where no one is to be trusted, and to restore them in good time to their rightful owner. There, are you answered?”

"No. You have no right to touch the diamonds. It is Madame l'Abbesse who is responsible for them—not you, certainly. You will leave them here. I shall set a guard over them until Madame l'Abbesse sends her orders."

The Chevalier's manner was courteous, if his words were peremptory, and his quiet resoluteness seemed to have its effect both on Madame de Saint-Gervais and her accomplice, who ceased to wriggle. She made no reply at once to the last announcement, but as she bent over the table and moved her fingers among the necklaces and rings as if she loved them, all her thin face was wrinkled with a smile.

"Why do you not fly to the heiress herself," she said, "and warn her to take possession of her jewels?"

"I should say that she need not be troubled on the subject."

"That is my opinion. And by this time—" she turned and looked at the clock—"by this time, I think Renée would acknowledge that her mother-in-law is perhaps a safe person to be trusted with the care of the Montaigle heirlooms. Even you, Nicolas, will not deny that, I imagine!"

The young man frowned, completely bewildered. What did this woman mean? Baudouin began to choke, the Chevalier's knuckles pressing his throat inconveniently. Then a loud voice, shouting up the stairs, interrupted the strange conversation.

“Monsieur Nico! Monsieur Nico! Dame, he is not here. Have they made away with him too! Monsieur Nico!”

Nicolas turned to the door.

“What is it, Joli-gars? Ah, no doubt the coach is ready: they are waiting for me. But I must see to this. Madame, I leave you for the moment.”

He stepped out to the stairs, dragging Baudouin with him, and shut and bolted the library door on Madame de Saint-Gervais. There was a great clamour of wild confused cries in the court below. Joli-gars, striding up the stairs, met him half-way.

“Ah, liar,” he cried, seeing Baudouin scrambling on the ground. “There is foul play, and you are in it. Hold him, monsieur: no, give him to me.”

The steward screamed with terror as the young giant first set him on his feet, then shook him till his teeth chattered.

“Ah, who sent us all on a wild-goose chase after poachers, while our young lady was carried off by villains! Who did, I say!”

“What, what! You are mad!” cried Nicolas.

“Go down, monsieur. The reverend Mothers are there in the court. The Fontevrault coach is gone. Mademoiselle Renée is gone, and l’Oiselet, and old Michel, and Fanchon, and Monsieur Jean and his friends and servants are gone. That rascal Philippe is nowhere to be

found. But what have they done with old Michel, I ask you! He and the little fellow must be lying dead somewhere, or we could not have lost Mademoiselle."

Before Joli-gars had done speaking, Nicolas was down stairs and out in the court. For once, the Mère de Mortemart had lost her self-possession; with tears and sobs she was crying out—"But where is she? Where is she?" Her nuns were praying aloud; servants and peasants, men and women, Agathe tearing her hair—this time in earnest—were running, talking, shouting round them. All were mystified, for the conspirators had trusted none of the house people except Baudouin, not even those who had shown some devotion to the Saint-Gervais cause. No one could answer a question, but as Nicolas rushed on towards Renée's room, two or three more men appeared with old Michel and Fanchon, half-dead with terror and pain, found tied and gagged in the darkest corners of an unused stable. The crowd gathered round them: wine was brought to restore them. Louise de Mortemart, trembling from head to foot and supported by the nuns, listened breathless to their story. Even now old Michel could hardly believe that Philippe's message had not come from her at all.

It was evident that by these foul means the heiress had been spirited away.

"But where is l'Oiselet?" Agathe screamed. "Find him, some of you. He slept in his old

place, and as lightly as a rabbit. He would never have snored while they took Mademoiselle away. What did they do with them? Michel, Fanchon, do you know nothing, you two?”

Michel knew nothing, except that he had found the dwarf sleeping on the stairs.

Fanchon declared that l'Oiselet was there when the coach drove away; that she heard him shout, saw a man running after him, and heard Monsieur Jean's voice from the window, calling to Baudouin to hang the dwarf.

“Ah! We will hang Baudouin!” cried Joligars. “Let us look for him, let us find the little fellow, and if he is dead, then by all the Saints in Paradise and all the demons in hell——”

“Yes—time enough for that,” shouted Nicolas. “My horse, Jacquot!”

“But monsieur, where will you ride?” exclaimed the Mère de Mortemart. “How do you know where these men—to Paris, do you think? Yes, surely that is the most likely. Go to Versailles, monsieur. Apply to the Marquise de Maintenon. Surely a person so moral, so correct——”

“Ah, mon Dieu, madame, it is nearer than Paris! The clock, the clock! and I am losing time here—but some one knows!”

He dashed back to the tower door and leaped up the stairs, leaving Mother Louise quite mystified. The library door was open, Madame de Saint-Gervais was gone; so were the boxes of jewellery from the table. Baudouin also had

vanished, Joli-gars in his excitement having left him sprawling on the stairs.

"She must, she shall tell me!" said Nicolas between his teeth.

Rushing across the château to the rooms occupied by the Saint-Gervais family, he came suddenly, in the long corridor, on the Comte and Comtesse in high argument.

"Foolish! unpardonable! The most idiotic thing that your idiot son has ever done in his miserable life. His Majesty will never forgive him. Nothing displeases the King more than such an irregularity. You might have had the wisdom, madame, to stop it in time."

"There was no other way," cried the Comtesse. "We are not philosophers like you, Jean and I. At first sight, yes, it seems wicked—but after all, King or no King, it is boldness that takes this world—and the next, they say! You will change your note, my dear friend, when you know that the marriage is safely accomplished. And you can tell every one that *you* had no part in the affair. *You*, in your prudence, would have waited to contest the will till Renée was betrothed, at least, to some one else."

"The day after her father's burial—it is a terrible scandal, an atrocious mistake. We are ruined at Court for ever, I assure you. Will any one believe that I knew nothing of it?"

It was a strange thing to see Count Alexandre really agitated and in earnest.

"Then, monsieur," cried Nicolas, bursting upon

them, and hearing the last words, “you will tell me where to find them. I go at once to carry Renée to Fontevrault.”

The Comtesse laughed mockingly. The Comte’s manner changed entirely as he turned to the young man with his old, unpleasant smile.

“My dear boy, who are you?” he said. “One of the family? or Madame de Fontevrault’s agent? And permit me to remind you that Mademoiselle de Montaigle is no longer a child in arms, that she should be called ‘Renée.’ In fact she has probably, by this time, added another honourable name to her own.”

“Monsieur! You do not approve of this—this villainy! I heard you say that it was done without your knowledge.”

“Possibly, if I had been consulted, things might have been arranged in a different way. But I am charmed, I assure you, to welcome my daughter-in-law.”

Madame de Saint-Gervais laughed again.

“You will not tell me where they are gone?” said Nicolas, as quietly as he could. “I warn you both—I will raise France against you. My guardian not yet cold in his grave, and you, his relations, robbing him of both his daughter and his treasures. You shall be punished, if there is law in France, or justice with the King.”

The Comte made a slight grimace.

“You are a fine-spirited fellow, Nicolas. And it is alarming, certainly, to know that a man of such great influence is our enemy.”

Suddenly there arose a shout in the courtyard below. Nicolas looked out of the window, and saw the tall figures of Grand-Gui and Gars-cogne, marching up under the archway. Both men were fully armed, two great dogs were at their heels, and Grand-Gui was carrying what looked like a lifeless burden, its limbs wrapped in a large grey wolf-skin, one of his chief trophies of the chase.

Without another word Nicolas left the Saint-Gervais pair in the corridor, and hurried down. A moment before, he had been on the edge of despair; a sickening feeling of utter hopelessness had almost conquered him. Now, with the sight of those two men and what they carried, hope seemed to spring again. That was l'Oiselet; and if he was alive, there still existed a brain capable of out-plotting plotters, and of finding the way out of the most puzzling mazes, moral or physical. Years ago—Nicolas had not forgotten the helpless, bandaged frame, the blue eyes shining from the pillow, the brave weak voice talking—

“You and I, Monsieur Nico—your good heart and straight back, and my queer ways and cunning brain—”

And all for Mademoiselle Renée.

“Ah! poor l'Oiselet! Where did you find him, forester? What have they done to him? Alas! what will Madame l'Abbesse say?”

So the Mère de Mortemart lamented, in the centre of the little crowd which drew round

Grand-Gui. He bent on one knee, holding his burden tenderly in his left arm, and folding the wolf-skin back from the face. There were purple marks on l'Oiselet's deathly paleness, and the sweat stood in beads on his brow. Every breath he drew was a spasm of agonising pain, and though his heavy eyelids quivered, the power to speak or to look up seemed to be gone for ever.

"Fetch Pierrot! fetch the barber!" cried some. "Fetch Monsieur le Curé!" exclaimed others, judging more justly of l'Oiselet's state.

"Fetch Monsieur Nico!" commanded Grand-Gui.

As he knelt, Gars-cogne and the two dogs made a wild background to the scene.

"Who has done this?" cried Nico, the crowd making way for him.

"Monsieur Jean." The answer came like a growl of thunder from the throats of the two foresters.

"Where did you find him? L'Oiselet, old friend, cheer up," said the soldier. "I want your help and counsel, my man. Where have you been hidden all these hours?"

The eyelids trembled, and then the great spiritual eyes flashed out once more their message into those bent over them. L'Oiselet tried to speak, but it was not possible.

"He was in the coach, Monsieur Nico," said Grand-Gui. "Yes, in the coach with those two. Monsieur Jean threatened to kill Mademoiselle

if she would not marry him, and our little fellow up and at him with that play dagger of his. Monsieur Jean stabbed him and cut him about, and broke some bones—yes, the ribs have pierced the lungs—and threw him out of the coach window. Listen, then, monsieur, and all of you. He crawled and dragged himself for some hours through the forest till he lay at our door. He told us his story till the bleeding stopped more.”

“But where—where—which road?” Nicolas cried wildly.

“We thought it was the north road—but then how could the coach—Madame l’Abbesse’s great coach——”

“L’Oiselet! Courage! Speak! For Our Lord and Our Lady’s sake, for Mademoiselle Renée’s sake, whom you love as well as I——”

Again the eyes opened, and the sobbing breath became words—

“Vassy. There is time.”

“But is there time?” Nicolas murmured. The eyes held him yet a moment, and l’Oiselet was smiling. He stooped and kissed the cold damp brow.

“Adieu, mon brave!”

CHAPTER XXII

THREE BROTHERS

IT was not much more than an hour after noon, in the burning heat of the day, when Grand-Gui, Gars-cogne and Joli-gars, with two dogs running steadily before them, reached the northern boundary of the forest. This part of the domain, with its pines, sand-pits and population of rabbits, was not often visited by them. The neighbouring peasants stole the rabbits with impunity; the Marquis's wood-cutters hewed down the tall fir-trees and dragged them away; here and there a charcoal-burner's hut was hidden among the trees. But the great game—deer, wild-boar, wolf—did not haunt these regions, where there was little underwood to shelter them. It was with them, and with the larger forest trees where pheasants roosted, under whose roots, in dark mysterious depths of earth and moss, foxes, badgers, and other mischievous creatures had their holes, that the Marquis's foresters and keepers were mostly concerned.

There was no difficulty in tracing the course

of the coach along that north road. The turf and the sandy, peaty soil were all cut into furrows and holes by the broad wheels and the horses' tramping feet. Besides, the dogs followed unerringly. They stopped and snuffed about the place where l'Oiselet had been thrown out, where the stones on the edge of the road had rattled down with his small broken body into the deep sand-pits below. They stopped again where the coach had stopped for Jean's wounds to be dressed, where the road was all kicked and trampled about by the restless horses.

Not very far beyond this, the dogs behaved rather unaccountably. At one of the narrow paths leading off into the depths of the wood, they turned suddenly aside and seemed bent on following it. Their masters held a minute's consultation. Joli-gars went down on his knees and examined the path; then announced that a horse had gone down that way. The Chevalier had had the start of them, but they flattered themselves that their long swift legs were not far behind him.

"I believe it is Monsieur Nico's horse," said Joli-gars, slowly. "Small hoofs, well shod——"

"And the dogs are always right," Gars-cogne added.

"But why should he have turned off this way? This leads due west into Anjou. Vassy is north, in Maine."

"Ask the dogs! They know."

Joli-gars raised himself, and both brothers looked at Grand-Gui, who stood balancing on one leg, his keen face bent towards the north, a dark fire in his eyes, grave and dreamy.

“What are you lazy logs waiting for?”

“Why see Gui, Monsieur Nico has taken this road.”

“What is that to us?”

“The dogs say we should follow him.”

“Then go, if you please. My road leads me to Vassy. It is I alone, then, who will rescue Mademoiselle. So be it!”

He was off, but not without a low whistle, which brought his dog rather unwillingly to his heels.

“So—we cannot let him go alone,” said Joli-gars.

“We are all fools together. I want something to drink. If Mademoiselle is married by this time, what is the use of running our legs off?”

“Come, old grumbler! At least you may get a chance of laying your hands on Monsieur Jean.”

“And be killed myself, I expect. Ay, I did not tell you. When we looked out of the door this morning and found the little fellow lying there, I saw one magpie sitting on the old oak just over my head.”

“But it was for him, stupid, not for you. I doubt he is dead by this time, in spite of my wife and Pierrot.”

"Ah—well, no good will come of it," Gars-cogne went on grumbling.

But his strong frame had already outstripped Joli-gars, bounding after Grand-Gui.

They came to another stop when the last fir-trees were left behind, and in descending to the poplar-edged valley they reached the place where the coach had broken down. It was not there now, but there were signs of a great scuffle in the road, ploughed in all directions by plunging horses and tramping men. The foresters could not explain these marks at all to their satisfaction. The dogs showed their opinion by running down the hill.

"There is the *Chapeau Rouge*," said Grand-Gui. "The rascal Leblanc shall give us news of them."

But the next turn in the hill brought them all to a sudden stand. With one accord they whistled to the dogs, who came back and crouched behind them, growling. They stepped off the road, went down on their knees, and crawled through the long grass till they overlooked the inn, so near to it that they could have hit the nearest chimney with a stone. The coach was at the door, the six horses harnessed, the postilions in their places, two or three men holding saddle-horses. All was ready and waiting for a start.

"They must have felt pretty safe, to stop here for dinner," muttered Joli-gars, stifling a laugh. "Or the little fellow must have hurt Monsieur

Jean more than he thought with that toy dagger of his. I thought it would not kill a mouse."

"They had an accident on the hill there," said Grand-Gui. "Now, brothers, they are all in the house. We must see to both sides at once. Is there not a way in that Joli-gars knows? Through the great room where those stolen barrels were found? We must see that Mademoiselle is not snatched out that way."

"Bien! I charge myself with the back of the house," said Joli-gars cheerfully.

"Ga'cogne and I must tackle the three masters. You have cord, so have I. We leave them bound, as they left old Michel. The servants, except Philippe, are not worth counting. If they are troublesome, we can set the dogs on them. The landlord knows us; he will not interfere. We can put Mademoiselle in the coach, make him and his brother ride the horses, and run beside it ourselves to Fontevrault. That is the whole matter."

"Why the lumbering coach, Gui? I would rather carry the little lady myself by a short cut."

"You would shake her to death. And she is not a child now, remember, but a great lady."

"Our little lady a great lady!" Joli-gars shook with laughter; he did not grow less frivolous with years. "But where can Monsieur Nico be?"

"No matter. We have our work to do. Now, down with you all, and gently."

"I wish I had not seen that magpie!" Garscogne groaned, as he prepared to follow.

They had not reached the house, going down cautiously in the shade behind the poplar-stems, when the landlord, leading a horse, peered over the top of the hill behind them. He saw with consternation the repaired coach at the door, and all the signs of life stirring about the place that he had left buried in noonday drowsiness, much improved by the strong wine in his cellar. All was found out, then. He had been missed, no doubt. He and his horse were in the greatest danger. As to the three foresters, stealing down-hill on an errand easily guessed, they would only run their heads into a wasps' nest. They were no friends or favourites of his, however, and his conscience was not a tender one. But before disappearing by a side path which led to a hovel where he could hide his horse, himself watching the course of events from a safe distance, he whistled sharply between his fingers once or twice. Not one of the brothers turned his head.

"It is no affair of mine," muttered the landlord. "Surely I had something better to do than to race across country for her. She can but turn me out and ruin me—and she will hardly do that now."

Joli-gars slipped round unseen to the back of the rambling old building, where an outside staircase, much decayed, led up to a door in the wall. He mounted it lightly and quickly,

tried the door, which yielded, and stepped into a dark hole within. This was in fact the large cupboard, through which there was a direct entrance into the room where Renée had been imprisoned through those morning hours. The brass-handled door flew open before Joli-gars at the same instant that the door of the room itself was unlocked and opened by Monsieur de Bellefontaine. They faced each other; the young noble, flushed, slender, graceful, caught in the act of a formal bow to the lady he supposed to be there; and the son of Guillaume the peasant, burnt dark by the sun of June, handsome, towering in his strength a head and shoulders taller.

In the shuttered room the light was dim, and Bellefontaine stared fiercely all round, as well as at the intruder, before he satisfied himself that Mademoiselle de Montaigle was not there.

“What do you want here, canaille?” he said.

“What we mean to have—our lady,” Joli-gars answered, looking him up and down.

“Why, you brute, she is not here. You have taken her away already. Where is she? What have you done with her? Come, you will answer to the Vicomte for this.”

His rapier flashed out. Joli-gars laughed.

“I have but now come in,” he said, “through the cupboard there. If you thought Mademoiselle was in this room, it is by that way she has escaped you. Monsieur Nico has fetched her away.”

"Is it so? Then we shall soon catch them," cried Bellefontaine; and he was dashing out of the room, when Joli-gars laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, Monsieur le Comte," he said. "First give me that bit of steel." He took the rapier and flung it across the room. Before it had rattled on the floor, Bellefontaine was forced into one of the large chairs, while Joli-gars, pressing his throat with one hand, drew his long knife with the other.

"Listen, my little monsieur," he said. "Take your choice. Shall I fasten you to the chair with this, or with a piece of rope which I have here?"

"You murdering villain, what do you mean?" the young Comte yelled, struggling furiously.

"If you are murdered, as you call it, it will be your own choice. Come, I am three times as strong as you," said Joli-gars, smiling. "Cease struggling, or you will run on my knife of your own accord. Voilà! Sit well back and keep still. Now, arms first."

Still it was a troublesome job. Joli-gars had hardly finished it, his victim struggling, raving, swearing all the choicest oaths of the day, when the loud report of a pistol, somewhere below, deafened their ears and shook the room. Joli-gars often afterwards regretted the yards of good cord he wasted on that occasion. For he did not even stop to cut it off, but left the Comte tied hand and foot to the chair, bolted out of the

room, along the dark passage, and headlong down the stairs to the large living-room. He dashed open the door and burst in upon a scene which froze the smile on his merry lips and sobered him for many a long day after.

Monsieur de Mancel, made of quicksilver, had not taken his midday rest quite so peacefully as his companions. He was awake to the fact that no doctor, no priest, and no smith appeared in consequence of the landlord's message. Going to look for the landlord and make inquiries, he could nowhere find him. This made him a little uneasy, for valuable time was slipping away, and the Vassy messenger could not be expected till much later in the afternoon. He called Philippe, the most resourceful of the men, the most eager too to recommend himself to Monsieur de Vassy. Between them, in one of the outer sheds of the *Chapeau Rouge*, they found a set of wheelwright's tools, and less energy than theirs would have sufficed to set the clumsy coach on its four wheels again. The horses, well fed, were soon led out and harnessed, the coach was brought down to the door, and De Mancel was busy rousing Jean, who in spite of his smarting wounds lay in a heavy sleep on the settle, while De Bellefontaine, pleased with his errand, went lightly upstairs to announce the coach to Mademoiselle de Montaigle, when a sudden cry rang outside, and the two foresters, wild and tall, red and dusty from their long run, appeared without asking leave in the brown

shadows of the room. They left their dogs outside, with a word which warned them not to let those men follow their masters. The dogs understood well. They sat on the doorstep with red eyes rolling, tongues lolling out and jaws gaping. Their strong teeth had pulled down wolves, and looked threatening enough now; the rough grey hair on their backs bristled fiercely.

"What do you want here, foresters? Come, be off with you! You are intruding," the Baron de Mancel began boldly, but he was conscious of a slight chill at the sight of these pursuing, avenging servants of Mademoiselle de Montaigle. Their looks and manner were too unpromising to be pleasant.

Neither Grand-Gui nor Gars-cogne was quick of tongue, especially before superiors. Grand-Gui said very quietly, after staring for a moment, "Monsieur Jean will understand."

"How were they let in?" Jean stammered furiously. "Was everybody asleep? Have I none but fools and cowards, then? Get you gone, Grand-Gui, with your lump of a brother!"

He tried to rise, exclaimed with pain, and flung himself back with his hand to his side.

"Monsieur Jean is wounded, it seems!" said Grand-Gui, and he smiled, a strange thing for him. "With l'Oiselet's little dagger. The fight was fairly equal, then—I am glad of it."

"What are you mumbling about l'Oiselet? Go and look for him, if you want him. He is

lying dead somewhere in the forest. He went too far, your l'Oiselet, in trying to cross me. Be off, or you will do the same."

"Monsieur Jean is not the murderer he thinks himself." Grand-Gui spoke gravely and very gently. "Wait, Ga'cogne," he said to his brother, who did not repress a savage snarl. "L'Oiselet came to our door this morning and brought us news of Monsieur Jean's doings, and how he had carried off our lady by force, and threatened her with death if she would not consent to marry him." Here Monsieur de Mancel, listening intently, started with incredulous disgust. "He gave us the route," Grand-Gui went on, as Jean remained silent. "Monsieur le Chevalier started before us, and ought to have been here before us. We think he must by some mishap have taken a wrong road. But we shall take Madame l'Abbesse's coach, and our lady will be safe with us. My youngest brother is now searching the house for her. Meanwhile——" he swiftly unwound a cord from his waist, recommended De Mancel to Gars-cogne with a jerk of the head, and advanced upon Jean with a face which was the more terrible from its set quietness and gravity.

"We shall not hurt the gentlemen, if they do not resist," he said.

Jean burst into a laugh.

"Let us see whether this one has nine lives like his friend the dwarf!"

He took the pistol, ready cocked, which lay near him, and fired with an aim that was careless

and unsteady. But Grand-Gui threw up his arms and fell crashing down, shot through the heart.

"Mademoiselle!" he called, in a voice that rang through the old house.

He was dead before Joli-gars reached him, rushing wildly into the room.

But the next moment, before any one could interfere, a blow from Gars-cogne's fist had laid Monsieur Jean beside him.

"You will be hanged for this, forester," said the Baron de Mancel, coolly.

"I will earn the rope," Gars-cogne said, with a step towards him.

De Mancel drew his sword and faced the furious giant.

"I do not like to use my sword on canaille. Still, you are a bold sort of canaille, so come on and feel it, my fine fellow. But I rather advise you to give yourself up to justice."

"Stand back then, Ga'cogne," said Joli-gars, rising to his feet; he had been stooping over his brother, hoping against hope that the wound was not mortal. "We have no quarrel with this gentleman," he said. "Let him give us up our lady, and we will carry her and our brother away. Where is she, monsieur?"

"Find her for yourselves. I have had enough of it," said De Mancel.

While the two brothers were searching the house, having called their dogs away from the door to follow them, he called the men in and

made them carry Jean's insensible body out to the coach. As they were doing this, De Bellefontaine suddenly appeared among them.

"What have you done with the heiress?" said De Mancel.

"She was not there."

"That is the landlord's doing. I suspected the rascal. This is the worst failure I was ever concerned in; it sickens me of adventures. Come, let us make the best of our way to Vassy with our unfortunate friend. Impossible to know yet if the monster has killed him, but he felled him like an ox. However, he has a thick skull. And I will bear witness that the fellow was provoked."

"They are magnificent, those foresters. Pity the tallest is dead," said the young Count, with a not unkindly glance at Grand-Gui where he lay.

No one ever heard from him his own little part in the adventure. It was too affecting to his pride, especially as Joli-gars had returned and set him free.

The two remaining sons of old Guillaume carried their eldest brother slowly home through the forest. Night had fallen when they reached their own old hovel; the stars were shining in their own small space of sky. They laid Grand-Gui down, and watched him till day.

"That magpie!" Gars-cogne groaned.

"Mademoiselle will be sorry," said Joli-gars. But where was she? She had escaped from

the robbers, but how? The forest must be searched to-morrow.

That evening saw the old inn, the *Chapeau Rouge*, flaming to heaven, the distracted landlord vainly trying to save some of his goods. This was a last piece of malice performed joyfully by Philippe the groom, on a careless hint from the Baron de Mancel.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RIDE THROUGH THE FOREST

MADemoiselle DE MONTAIGLE was justified in saying that the inn was hers and the innkeeper her servant. He helped her on his horse, which was strong and handsome and carried a lady's saddle; perhaps it would have been unwise to inquire how he became possessed of horse or saddle. Renée was far from troubling her young head on the subject. He had thought of everything, this worthy man. He brought a bag of cakes and a flask of wine.

"Mademoiselle can eat and drink," he said, "as soon as we are safely lost in the forest."

"Yes, my friend, with pleasure, for I am starving," Renée answered cheerfully.

The world, her own world, had never seemed to her so beautiful. She was free; that terror of a forced marriage lay behind her; the refuge offered by l'Oiselet's dagger seemed foolish now, as well as sinful. All this night and morning were like a dreadful dream from which she had awaked, oh, so gladly, to find herself on horseback in the beautiful wild lanes scented with

honeysuckle, long branches laden with red and white roses arching the road and sometimes touching her hood as she rode under them.

The little man trotted at the horse's head, leading him carefully up the rough road. He was very silent and sometimes looked round, listening nervously for sounds of pursuit; but there were none; neither man nor beast broke the heavy stillness of noon. All went well till the forest boundary was past. They had not gone far on the road the coach had taken when they came to a side road to their right, leading westward; hardly indeed to be called a road, but like many of the hunting paths in the forest, just wide enough to ride along. The guide was about to turn the horse into this pathway.

"Stop! Where are you going?" cried Mademoiselle Renée.

"Mademoiselle, this is the best way. The road is narrow at first, but we shall presently come into a broader one, and three hours hence we shall strike the main road, Monseigneur's great road, in the very middle of the forest. Trust me, mademoiselle. I have lived here from a boy, and I know my way. I have visited my uncle, though he never made me too welcome, indeed. Now he will sing to another tune, I think!"

"Your uncle, good man? Who is your uncle?"

"Mademoiselle knows Leblanc, the steward of Madame l'Abbesse?"

"But who does not?"

"I am Jacques Leblanc, his nephew, at mademoiselle's service. He has tried to disown me, it's true, more than once or twice. He forgot that a man must live, and that there is not too much chance for an honest man in times like these. But mademoiselle will arrange all that. Come, beast!"

"Stop, I say. This road of yours—it is surely a most roundabout way to Montaigle."

"But Mademoiselle! It is not the way to Montaigle at all. It is the way to Fontevrault."

"I am not going to Fontevrault. This that we stand on is the direct road to the château, the road by which they brought me, is it not? Allons!"

Jacques Leblanc's yellow face became pink. He stamped, slapped his leg, and ground his teeth.

"Does mademoiselle reflect," he stammered out, "that she will be missed and pursued? That those gentlemen will come galloping along this road, and will catch us long before we are near Montaigle! And what will they not do to me, who have risked life and limb and my best horse for mademoiselle? No, I will not—indeed I will not. I have not the courage—I value these poor bones of mine. Mademoiselle can ride on alone, for I dare not. I have been bold enough already, for we all know what Monsieur le Vicomte is. No! Mademoiselle will remember me in the future—poor Jacques Leblanc of the

Chapeau Rouge, who would have guided her through the forest, hidden her if necessary, brought her safe to Madame l'Abbesse in the end. I shall be paid for my good horse and saddle—I trust mademoiselle for that. But to go along this road with certain death following after—no!”

He became more voluble as he went on, and only stopped for want of breath, with anxious eyes and ears bent down the road. Not a sound except from the insects, and the occasional cry of some small wild creature in the wood.

“My good man, you are ridiculous,” said Renée scornfully, yet not unkindly. “Monsieur de Vassy will not touch you. And do you suppose that my people will not be searching for me high and low? We shall meet them immediately, no doubt. And many things call me home. Come, obey me. I will be responsible for you.”

Jacques groaned and shrugged his shoulders. He would gladly have disobeyed her, have turned at once into those depths of lonely woodland, almost impassable except to those who knew them well, whether their knowledge was honestly gained or not. Leblanc had disgraced his excellent uncle's name by being known as one of the cleverest poachers in the country. Now that his uncle, under the Abbess, was likely to rule Montaigne for a time as well as Fontevault, it seemed advisable that these old

stories should be forgotten. And the heiress's favour was worth having.

So, in spite of his groans, he hurried the horse along the Montaigle road.

They had gone some distance silently, and Renée, with the long lock of l'Oiselet's hair still twined round her wrist, was living again in frightful memory the adventures of the night, trying to recognise the road, then seen so dimly, to make out the spot where her poor dwarf had disappeared. Something of the forest terror, creeping over her, had dulled the first young joy of freedom; but her mind was busy with thoughts of all that must be done at Montaigle and could not be left to her aunt's wisdom in the future: first and foremost, the search for l'Oiselet, which she could entrust to Grand-Gui; then, a final farewell to her Saint-Gervais cousins, to whom she gave the credit of being innocent of their son's wicked scheme; then, the consoling of the dear Mother de Mortemart, whose state of despair she guessed; and then, Nico. Must this, too, be farewell? No; the little lady resolved to command her Chevalier to stay at Montaigle till she herself, with the Mère de Mortemart, departed in her own coach for Fontevrault.

"Mademoiselle, I hear a horse!"

Leblanc was livid with fear; his teeth were chattering.

"But which way is it coming?"

"I think—from Montaigle."

“Forward, then.”

There was a twist in the road just beyond, where the coach, ignorantly driven in the darkness, had had one of its narrowest escapes of being overturned. A stately clump of beeches jutted out into the road, which had been made to turn them. Under these old trees, in the warm shadow of afternoon, young Nicolas came galloping alone on his way to Vassy. He pulled up so suddenly that his horse nearly lost its footing, was off and by Renée’s side before either of them spoke. She, pale and heavy-eyed, leaned forward to him and put both her hands in his. Her black hood fell a little forward, so that no one but himself could see her eyes and the welcome they gave him. It almost stupefied him.

“She loves me! She does love me,” he thought. “Oh, Renée!” he sighed under his breath.

Jacques Leblanc winked aside at the beech-trees.

“And where are you going, Nico?” murmured Mademoiselle Renée, the most self-possessed of the two.

“I was on the way to Vassy. That was what l’Oiselet told us. You have escaped, thank God! but how?”

“L’Oiselet told you—how? where is he? I thought Jean must have killed him. He would have died for me. How glad I am! Poor l’Oiselet! Tell me all quickly. And the dear

Mother de Mortemart? And you were riding after me alone?"

Nico hardly knew how to answer her: his brain seemed to reel. With one hand he caressed her horse's neck, the other still held hers. He had thrown his own bridle to Leblanc.

It was not easy to tell her all. He hardly thought that l'Oiselet could be still alive, but he would not sadden that moment by telling her so. He told her that Agathe was taking care of him; that the foresters were by this time following on the road to Vassy; that the Mère de Mortemart was distracted, Madame de Saint-Gervais triumphant.

"Is it possible! Oh, wicked woman! She knew! I cannot believe it!" Renée cried.

"She looked at the clock this morning, and said—to me—that she was already your mother-in-law."

"Ah, my friend! There was no real danger of that," said Renée gently.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I should have preferred Purgatory. No, you did not believe her. Come, let us go forward! To Montaigle, and as fast as we can.—Follow us at your leisure, good man—or go back, if you will, and come to me later to fetch your horse and your reward."

"You will not go back to Montaigle, Renée, while your cousins are there. I cannot allow it, do you see! Trust yourself to me, and I will take you across country to Fontevrault."

The little lady did not at once accept this suggestion. But Nicolas was very firm, and Leblanc struck in eagerly on the same side. He warned them too of the danger of pursuit, which Renée did not seem to realise.

"But the Mère de Mortemart," she said. "And Grand-Gui and his brothers! They will run all the way to Vassy after me, or at least to the inn; and there will be a fight, and who knows what may happen! No, no; I have not enough faithful friends to risk them so. You see, Nico, I must go to Montaigle."

"You must not. This man will go. He can take his horse and go. I will take you on my horse; it will be easier, through the forest. It is decided. Come, I will hear no more."

He had lifted her before she could remonstrate, and set her on his own saddle. Renée was a little angry, but she smiled.

"Do then what Monsieur le Chevalier says," she commanded Leblanc, with a queenly air; she must be obeyed by somebody. "Carry my most respectful greetings to Madame de Mortemart, at the Château de Montaigle. Beg her to take the coach and drive at once to Fontevrault. Tell her I am safe and well in Monsieur le Chevalier's care, and shall be there as soon as she. Warn the foresters, and any you may meet in search of me, to go no farther. Tell them I say that the punishment of those wicked men is not for them. But let them shut up Baudouin in the prison."

Jacques Leblanc bowed. With great anxiety for Mademoiselle's comfort, he hung the bag of cakes and the flask of wine on Nico's horse; then pointed out a path beyond the beech-trees, which led, he assured them, at no very great distance, into the main road to Fontevrault.

"I thank you, Leblanc. I will see that you are well rewarded," said his liege lady.

"I am glad to have served Mademoiselle," the fellow answered.

Holding his horse, he watched them disappear into the shadows of the wood, there where Joligars traced so unerringly the prints of Nico's horse's feet, and where the clever dogs tried to follow.

"A pretty pair!" he said to himself, grinning. "I wish them a pleasant journey. But as to my lady's messages—*merci, monsieur!* I see nothing urgent in them, and I shall do what is best for myself—that is, go home. A little round about, perhaps, for fear of the gentlemen in pursuit. So—come along, little horse!"

A pleasant journey! As he led his horse deeper and deeper into that lonely woodland world, Nicolas d'Aumont could have found it in his heart to wish that Renée had ordered her ill-looking guide to follow her to Fontevrault, instead of sending him on to Montaigne. To be alone with her for hours and hours, far from humankind, with little chance of meeting even a charcoal-burner or a woodman in those miles of hill and valley covered with great trees or with

thick groups of hollies, yews, thorns—deep little forests of ferns and bracken, wild roses flung in lovely garlands everywhere, emerald moss tracing the course of some spring that spread in low marshy places rich in water-plants and flowers—to follow the path, almost by guess-work and by the slanting sunbeams as the day began to wane, leading the horse that carried his one treasure in all the world, and yet hardly daring to turn his head and look up, or to speak, for fear of a too kind, too sweet answer! It was far harder now than it had ever been, now, after what he had read in those dark eyes, to remember how he was bound in honour never to forget the impassable distance between them. The Moon and Endymion was a poor comparison. The Moon might stoop to a mortal: Renée de Mont-aigle, a great lady in France, must not stoop to a poor gentleman of her own degree. His devotion must always be that of Madame de Fontevrault's ideal lover. And to a man of his nature it was possible, as long as his love was something of a child, and as long as he could say to himself with conviction, "She does not know what love is." It was harder now.

Renée talked to him a good deal at first. She told him something of her adventure, but not much, for Jean's name made him shiver from head to foot with rage.

"Three villains!" he said. "But they shall pay for it. When once you are safe, they shall account for it to me."

"I don't mind now," Renée said softly. "Let us forget them. I am with you, and poor l'Oiselet is safe. What does anything else matter?"

He took refuge in describing to her the morning at Montaigne; Madame de Saint-Gervais' attempt on the jewels, the discovery of poor Michel and Fanchon, and all that had followed. She listened with many exclamations.

"Could you have believed, Nico, that there were so many wicked people in the world? Did such dreadful things ever happen before? That is what they mean at the convent, when they talk about this wicked world. Ah! and yet one must stay in it!" she sighed. "My dear little Mère de Mortemart will bring Michel and Fanchon safe back to Fontevrault. And now, Nico, you will be surprised, but I am thinking of the cakes in that good landlord's bag. You know, I have had no food since last night. I would not take what those men offered me."

"Since last night! But you must be dead!" Nico cried, instantly stopping.

"No. But when they called me to start at midnight, I never thought of breakfast. Not here, Nico. This is all thorns and briars. I will dismount in a nice grassy place and sit in the shade, and you shall have some cakes too, if you deserve them."

He did not look up, and the little playfulness seemed thrown away. She watched him with a touch of sadness. Was he anxious, afraid, un-

happy? What, here in the beautiful greenwood, safe in these depths of her own old forest, now that the birds were beginning to wake and to sing among the leaves! What could he wish for more than to be here alone with her? It ought to be the happiest day of his life; she rather thought it was the happiest day of her own. But then, had she forgotten that he was always rather dull, and slow of speech—poor Nico!

A lovely mossy place among the roots of a great beech, its young shining leaves a royal canopy; here she sat in state while he brought her the cakes and wine. His manner was grave, and he hardly looked at her, stupid Nico! But he lay at her feet and she gave him a piece of cake, as if he had been her dog lying there. Their eyes met, hers smiling divinely, his—they made her a little sadder. His colour changed and he looked away, the cake seemed likely to choke him. Renée had a sense of the ridiculous, and the situation appealed to it.

Her kind heart, however, sought for some means of setting her friend at his ease, and she began to talk of that old story years ago, when this same Nico as he rode into the world found her lying asleep in this same forest. It was interesting to find that the story was still to him deeply mysterious, that he crossed himself, and looked away to where some pale birches gleamed in a dell close by, as if he saw the

white sweeping robes of her dead mother, the Marquise. She hastened to tell him the truth of it all, and in listening he almost forgot his new fear of her. As she talked of Grand-Gui, her faithful servant and friend, it seemed suddenly as if something strange were abroad in the forest. A wind circled round the tree, and lifted her hair, the leaves all about rustled; Nico's horse started and plunged where he stood, then trembled violently. High up above, an owl hooted dismally, and a flight of small birds flew hurrying down the glen. Both Nico and Renée started, looking about them wonderingly.

"Did you hear some one say 'Mademoiselle'?" the girl murmured, a little pale.

"No, I heard nothing, except the birds."

"Let us go on," she said. "I do not like this place, Nico."

Afterwards they knew that at that same hour Grand-Gui had given his life for her.

On they went, more silently now, and before very long, by careful steering, they reached the broad road, and pursued their way steadily towards the Coin des Larrons and the road to Fontevrault. Nicolas was anxious to be out of the forest before nightfall.

They had once or twice startled a deer on their passage, couching in the bracken; and as in the soft and lovely evening they were leaving the wood at the Coin des Larrons, suddenly a great grey wolf appeared before them, standing in the

very middle of the road. Nicolas pulled the horse up sharply and loosened a pistol.

"Fear nothing," said Renée over his shoulder. "He is only one of my wolves. Go, good beast, back to your friends. Some day we will hunt you, but not now."

The wolf trotted on slowly and disappeared in the underwood.

"See how obedient my vassals are!" murmured the little lady.

"Probably he neither saw nor smelt us, the wind is south," said Nicolas.

"You really are without imagination!"

"Ah, yes, I am a stupid stock!" he laughed in answer.

The forest dangers were over, but the roads held more, and to Nicolas more alarming ones. *Larrons*, highwaymen, lawless people, strong beggars, strolling pedlars and mountebanks; the wickedness of some of these and the curiosity of others were to be feared, with such a charge as he carried behind him. It now seemed the quickest way to ride double, and he did what he could to hide his own accoutrements, keeping a pistol near his hand, and to muffle Renée as completely as possible in the long black cloak she wore. Thus they rode for miles as night came on; his horse, strong and young, seemed to feel the extra weight nothing, but carried them swiftly past various roadside encampments where lights glimmered and rough

voices called after them. Thus at length they came to the bridge at Saumur, crossed it safely, the stars of that glorious June night flashing in the Loire, rode steadily along the quay as though they were quiet bourgeois returning home from some fair in the country. Nicolas would stop nowhere for rest or food, but pushed on to Fontevrault, along the road by the Loire which turned at Montsoreau into a wilder woodland road leading to the Abbey.

When the sleeping village of Montsoreau with its historic château was safely past, Nicolas dismounted, and went on leading his horse up the road. It was lonely, shaded by large groups of chestnut and walnut trees. There was a warm aromatic scent in the air, night-birds were crying, strange voices never heard by day. It would be midnight before they reached the Abbey gates.

Renée looked up at the stars and down at him as he walked by her side. She thought of her father and mother. What had saved her from Jean de Vassy, if not that dear mother's prayers! As for her father—"He understood me, I know he did, and he would have let me have my way!" Last night—oh, horrible remembrance!

"Ah, Nico! My aunt will ask for news of l'Oiselet."

It had been a very long silence that was thus suddenly broken.

Nicolas was startled. His whole mind had

been so bent on this journey and its own risks that he had forgotten everything else.

"Let us hope for the best," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

"Nico"—she began again, and there was something in her voice, a pathetic thrill, which made his heart beat faster. "Tell me, what will come next?"

"Fontevrault — and adieu," he answered. "There you will be safe."

"Safe? What do you mean by safety, Nico? What will they do with me?"

"Whatever Madame l'Abbesse does will be right."

Renée gave a little laugh. Such a sentiment seemed too correct to be real.

"What confidence!" she said. "I am not so sure of that. She will marry me to somebody."

"Well!"

"You call it 'well'? To me it seems very ill."

"Every lady must marry," Nicolas said sternly, "at least, every lady like you. What is the use of playing with these things? It is life, it is necessity. Or else the convent—and that is not for you."

"I know it is not," Renée murmured. "Listen, Nico," she bent forward and touched his shoulder. He started and looked up, but her face was in deep shadow. Only her voice went on speaking to him, passionate and low, like maddening music in the darkness. "It will be

adieu in a few minutes you say—adieu for life—then, though you may think me wrong and immodest, we must understand each other. My poor father when he was dying—do you remember? He told me there were other men in France, and I said to him that there was only one—you know—you knew then—what I meant, Nico?”

He muttered something inaudible.

“What were the last words he cried to my mother?—he saw her, you know. Oh yes, you know. ‘Diane, you have your way—but these poor children’—If he had lived, Nico, do you think he would have forced on me some marriage that I hated?”

Still Nicolas made no reply.

“Mon Dieu!” she murmured, so low that he hardly caught the words—“I see, then—you do not love me.”

The horse stopped—gladly enough, for he was tired—and Nico stood looking up in the starlight.

“Love you, Renée? That surely is not the question. It is one of honour, not of love. Remember who you are, and who I am. How could I speak of love to you, so far above me? That day, my queen, when I met you in the garden at Fontevrault, Madame l’Abbesse read my heart. But she believed also in my honour, or I should never have gone with you to Mont-aigle. She trusted me. Why do you try then to make me forget——”

Ah, wicked Renée! She stooped low from the saddle, her face was close to his.

“Then—if it is adieu——”

Their first kiss, since the meeting in the garden at Fontevrault, and one to be remembered when all others were forgotten.

CHAPTER XXIV

A STRANGE WEDDING

SEPARATION came with the lights of Fontevrault. All the Abbey precincts were astir: the Abbess herself was in the cloister, and a troop of her mounted guards were drawn up in the outer court. They were about to ride off in two divisions, one to Montaigle, to take possession of the château and assert her authority there, the other to Vassy, in almost hopeless pursuit of the stolen girl and in support of the few faithful ones who had already followed her.

The Mother Louise had only waited to receive l'Oiselet's last sigh. She had left him, when the weary little frame could suffer no more, with the good old Curé and in Agathe's tender care, had ordered the coach without any reference to Monsieur and Madame de Saint-Gervais, and had driven away with her nuns to carry to Fontevrault her load of news, good and bad: the Marquis's will, the crime that had been its immediate consequence. Her arrival acted like a magician's touch on Madame de Fontevrault. Leaving her bed, forgetting pain and fever, she was

everywhere that night, ordering everything, thinking of everything. The regular routine had never been so disturbed. A letter to the King was written with the Abbess's crippled hand, copied by her secretaries, who wrote at her dictation other letters, to her brother, to Madame de Maintenon, to various persons high in power. Two mounted messengers were ready to start for Paris and Versailles, carrying the news of Monsieur de Montaigle's last will and testament, so scandalously disobeyed by the violent action of Jean de Vassy. The Abbess knew the King well, and hoped, though she could not be sure, that he would take her side in this affair. Even if the wretch had dragged Mademoiselle de Montaigle through some sort of marriage ceremony—it might be annulled, it might be proved illegal—or at least the Bastille or Vincennes might teach him to repent of his precipitancy.

All the fire of her noble race glowed in Madame Gabrielle's dark eyes as she restlessly paced the cloister, while the Grand Prioress, the Mère de la Mothaye, wrung her hands and prophesied a still worse attack of rheumatism and fever.

Then, near midnight, the convent peace was disturbed by another arrival: a stream of torches and lanterns swept up together from the gates to the cloister door, bearing in their midst a tired horse, a girl, wild and flushed, clinging unconventionally to his mane, a young man, pale as death, leading him. At the steps she held

out her arms to him, and he lifted her down and carried her to the Abbess. He stood back, bowing deeply, while the girl flung herself at her feet, clinging to her habit, kissing her hands, breaking down suddenly, now that the dangers were past, into passionate, uncontrollable weeping.

The Abbess stooped and lifted her, held her close and kissed her tenderly.

"Peace, peace, my Renée! All is well."

She led her away, but before doing so she turned to Nicolas and held out her hand to him. He kissed it reverently, without speaking.

"My chevalier!" the Abbess said, very low, as her eyes, dim with tears, rested upon him. "Come to me in ten minutes," she said, "and tell me all."

The messengers to Paris and Versailles were countermanded; the guard was despatched to Montaigle, but not to Vassy. Nicolas's interview with the Abbess was not a long one; he had not much to tell—not much, at least, that could be told—beyond the fact of his meeting Renée with Jacques Leblanc in the forest road.

"Leblanc will be glad to hear such news of his good-for-nothing nephew," the Abbess said absently.

She looked hard at Nicolas. She was thinking, though he did not know it, of certain hurried words of passionate confession that had escaped from her young ward as she held her in a mother's

warm embrace, before leaving her to be fed and soothed to sleep by the Mère Louise.

“Go now, Monsieur le Chevalier,” she said. “Sleep well to-night. Your room is ready in the guest house, and Leblanc will see that you are well attended. Eat what he offers you—I command it, do you hear! You are young, and to you this day has been as exhausting as to your charge—your rescued friend. I may ask of you some further service to-morrow.”

“For her, madame?” Nicolas dared hardly meet her eyes.

“For her, and for me,” the Abbess answered gravely. “Now, good-night. I shall send for you in the morning.”

For herself there was no rest that night at all. The dawn, stealing palely in, found her deep in consultation, not with any of her nuns, even the most trusted, but with one who in these long sad days of her life of repentance—proved sincere by many a good action, and not least by the never-failing confidence and love of such a sister—spent a large part of her time at the Abbey of Fontevrault.

Neither sister quite knew which of them, in the small hours of that summer night, forgetting its heat and weariness—though the windows were prudently closed against white mists that stole up from the valleys—was the first to originate that wild and romantic idea. Either would have been glad to take the credit of it upon herself, even before success had justified it. Madame de

Fontevrault had felt that nothing else was possible, when she saw those two young creatures coming together out of the darkness, and caught Renée's first sobbing words as she led her away. Madame de Montespan declared from the first that it was the only way, even now, to save the little heiress from the clutches of her cousins.

"That horrible De Vassy is not seriously hurt, of course," she said. "They will make a hero of him, a martyr, a victim. Understand me, the King's own inclinations are always good. He sees right naturally. His instinct would be to treat Jean de Vassy as the brutal, disgusting, unworthy creature he is. And he has never cared much for the father, who thinks himself so superior to ordinary mortals. But the mother—ah, my dear, we women do more harm than good in this world—there is no limit to her hypocrisies, her flatteries. She will manage *her* to the end of time, and through *her* the King."

"But such management takes time, and therefore—" said Madame de Fontevrault.

"Therefore we must lose no time on our side," Madame de Montespan continued. Her still lovely face, her magnificent blue eyes, seemed to flash and smile with pleasure. She had few joys now, much ill-health, and fits of terrible depression; but to her last days she loved to see others happy, and this was her feeling now, mixed with the natural satisfaction, though the old life was left behind, of helping to outwit her clever rival.

“Sit down, ma belle,” she said merrily. “There are pens. Write another letter to his Majesty. Ah, what pleasure this gives me! I love a pretty marriage where the world has nothing to do. Youth and true love—ah, my Gabrielle, what blessings of God, and what a little value we human creatures set upon them!”

“Yes. I have a great confidence in the goodness and the friendship of the King,” said Madame Gabrielle. “Still, I do not hide from myself that this *may* condemn our poor little Chevalier to a lifelong prison.”

“It is worth the risk, and so the young man will think, if he is worthy,” said Madame de Montespan. “In any case, it is almost sure to mean safety for la petite.”

In the high choir of the Abbey church, where the sun, not long risen, glowed through rich old jewelled glass, with no witnesses but a few nuns in their black choir habits, the chaplains of the house and of the neighbouring monastery, a courtly abbé, a great lady or two, and the effigies of the four royal Plantagenets on their tombs; here and thus, informal, hurried, yet religious and stately—the bride in a simple robe of white serge without a single ornament, the bridegroom in his travelling dress of the day before—the marriage of Nicolas d’Aumont and Renée de Montaigle was celebrated.

When the short ceremony was over, the young people were instantly separated. There was

no questioning the Abbess's will. Renée disappeared into the depths of the convent, under the Grand Prioress's care. Nicolas received a letter from the Abbess to the King, and rode off, with two of her men in attendance, to Versailles. To both him and Renée the whole thing seemed like the wildest, most improbable dream. That they should have knelt together before that altar, and there plighted their troth; that Renée should even now wear a wonderful ring with a sapphire, which her aunt de Rochechouart had brought from her treasures to serve as a wedding ring—its story was told long afterwards; that Nicolas, the King's officer, should have presumed to marry without his sovereign's leave, and should have received from any lesser authority the hand of one of the richest heiresses in France; it was all so improbable. And yet it was certain! It was done, this impossible thing, and not even the King's power could undo it. Only the Church, which had bound, could unloose, and a pious king would hesitate before demanding that, without a better reason than a young man's want of fortune.

For a month no answer came to the Abbess from the King, and no news from Nicolas. Renée had never before known what dreariness meant. The mourning for her father, so strangely interrupted, was resumed with all the strictness of etiquette. Even the garden, which a few weeks ago had been a place of such enjoyment, was now only the scene of a formal promenade.

Married, yet a prisoner; treated, even by her aunt, with a mixture of stiff politeness and the strictest supervision; the little lady of Montaigle, who had had her way—adventures in plenty, the marriage her heart desired—almost regretted her child-life and her lessons.

Madame de Fontevrault thought it necessary to tell her very little about her own affairs, except indeed of the deaths of her two true friends, l'Oiselet and Grand-Gui. She was herself anxious beyond expression for the end of this affair. She heard that Jean de Vassy had recovered, and had gone back with his parents to Versailles. Her coach had been returned to her, considerably the worse for wear, but she swallowed her anger for the present. She also ascertained that the Comtesse had conveyed away with her some of the most valuable of the Montaigle heirlooms, but she held her peace on this matter also. What would the King do? What would be the effect of her letter, more strongly and eloquently worded, more boldly denouncing and confidently asking, than any she had ever dared to write to his Majesty? A royal order had been sent down to Montaigle, in obedience to which three persons had immediately gone to present themselves at Versailles: the Curé, the notary, and Charlot, called Joligars, the porter. The notary, by command, took with him the late Marquis's will and the principal deeds of the estates. It seemed, therefore, that the King was taking unusual trouble to

examine into the truth of what had been told him on either side. But every day's delay was a cause of fresh alarm to Madame de Fontevrault. She began to have serious qualms about that morning's work, which had seemed at the time so heroically right. Had she ruined the life of Diane's child, to save her from a danger which might in future be imaginary?

As the days went on, her fears for Nicolas deepened. The King might punish him, it was only too likely: and yet, as she had explained in her letter, the responsibility was not his. Poor boy! his honest, handsome face haunted the Abbess night and day. With what fearless yet puzzled joy he had gone through the marriage ceremony! How loyal he was, how honourable he had been—truly the perfect knight she had fancied. And now, perhaps, he was already shut up in a State prison: for lesser offences than a too ambitious marriage men had grown grey in the Bastille. Possibly, too probably, Nicolas d'Aumont was already in what should have been Jean de Vassy's cell there.

"Alas!" said the Abbess to herself, "all that I do for the child fails!"

Thus during the days of suspense she shrank from seeing Renée, and the young girl, in her strangest of positions, shed many tears alone.

CHAPTER XXV

A LETTER FROM THE KING

THE sultry heat of a July afternoon brooded over Fontevrault. Nearly all the Abbey was asleep; and Renée, in her narrow little room, sitting at her table, with a letter to Nico before her which was never finished, for she did not know how it was to reach him, had laid her head on her arms and slept too. She was sad, pale, and weary; her cap had fallen off, her curls were all in tumbled disorder; and even as she slept, two large tears crept from under her eyelids and ran down, blotting the letter.

So the Mère Louise found her, when she came to call her to the Abbess.

“Oh! It is Nico!” the girl started up with a cry.

“No, ma petite. He is not come—but it is a letter from the King.”

“Bad news? Oh, not bad news, dear little mother?”

“I do not know. Our Mother smiled when she told me to call you. I can say no more.

Oh, what hair, Renée! You look like a mad little pensionnaire, not a married lady."

"My hair! what does it matter!" and she was gone.

The Abbess sat in her own great chair, in her shady room, pale and suffering from the heat. The room was darkened so that her white figure seemed at first the only thing to be seen: then, standing just below, eyes dazzled by the glare of the cloister saw a very tall man dressed in black, with a folded letter in his hand. Renée, as usual, made her formal curtsy to the Abbess on entering the room, but it was hardly accomplished when she cried out, "Joli-gars!"

"Madame!"

The good fellow's broadest smile beamed upon her. Then he was on his knees, had kissed the hand his little lady gave him, and held up a letter.

"Madame," he repeated—the word seemed to please him hugely—"a letter from Monsieur le Baron. I was to give it into Madame's own hand."

"Monsieur le Baron!" Renée's face fell. What new persecutor was this?

She looked up at her aunt, then down at the letter, for the Abbess was certainly smiling. Then the pale face became crimson. For the letter was addressed, in Nico's well-known hand, to "Madame la Baronne d'Aumont de Mont-aigle, à l'Abbaye de Fontevrault."

“Go, Charlot,” said the Abbess. “We shall see you again later.”

Joli-gars rose and bowed.

“Ah, no, dear aunt; I have so much to say to him!” cried Renée. “Joli-gars, you must tell me a thousand things—of Agathe and the children—and then—oh, our Grand-Gui, the dear, faithful—” her voice broke into a sob—“Ah, how I have wept for him, and for poor l’Oiselet! What will ever make up to me for the loss of those two?”

Joli-gars looked grave and stern enough now.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, forgetting himself, “if my brother knows all, he is happy. And the little fellow too—it was the death they both would have chosen, to die for Mademoiselle Renée—pardon, madame!”

The Abbess made a peremptory sign, and Joli-gars, much confused, slunk hastily out of the room.

“I must tell her another time,” he muttered, “that if Ga’cogne gets a second chance of hitting Monsieur Jean, he won’t rise up again in such a hurry. Hang for it—ay, with pleasure—only Monsieur Nico will see to that.”

“Sit there, Renée,” said the Abbess. “Keep your letter till you have heard this from the King.”

“Has he made Nico a Baron?” cried the girl laughing. “He cannot be angry, then, dear aunt. He must be very kind.”

“Silence, and listen to me.”

“MADAME L’ABBESSE DE FONTEVRAULT: You are not mistaken in the belief that my friendship for you would lead me to examine carefully into any cause recommended to me by you. I have acquainted myself with all sides of this matter, and have resolved to uphold your action, though it has been represented to me as unusual and unnecessary. I have recommended the Vicomte de Vassy, and those who were concerned with him in the forcible abduction of Mademoiselle de Montaigle, to regain my favour by diligent service on the frontier. As to the husband that you, as her guardian under her father’s will, have chosen for this young lady, I have no objection to him. At the request of his brothers, I make him colonel of my new regiment of dragoons. I also create for him a barony, and command him to bear his wife’s name and arms with his own. A year’s service with his new regiment will be necessary before he can return to Anjou; in the meanwhile you will exercise your office as guardian. Certain heirlooms, now in the hands of Madame la Comtesse de Montaigle de Saint-Gervais, will be returned to you without delay. Be assured of my constant interest in all that concerns yourself, your protégés, and your Order, and remember me at all times in your prayers. I pray God to keep you, Madame l’Abbesse de Fontevrault, under His holy protection.

“LOUIS.”

"That is a triumph," said Madame Gabrielle. "Come and embrace me, Renée. Your mother will be contented now."

"But I am not!" cried the new Baronne, rebelliously. "Does the King mean that Nico will not come back for a year? What cruelty!"

"Oh, foolish child! And so young as you both are! Be thankful, and on your knees, that he is ever coming back at all. The Bastille was too likely an end for our romance, let me tell you. Now begone with your precious letter, for I must write my humblest thanks and yours to his Majesty."

Renée escaped; not back to her stifling room however, but away into the garden, down the avenue, the long *charmilles*, breathlessly still in the heat of that day. Not even a frog croaked in the fountain, when she sat down near it and read her young husband's letter. It was not eloquent; Nicolas had no genius for composition; but it satisfied her. She looked up, after puzzling through it for the third time, and in the deserted garden she seemed to see familiar figures; poor l'Oiselet, smiling under his yellow curls; then a tall, strange gentleman, very stately and grave at first, then suddenly more than her boy lover, Nico, had ever been to her. Only in May: the same rose-trees still in bloom; but a whole long year must pass before those dear arms held her again.

"Ah! time is so long!"

Curled up on the grass, her cheek on the stone edge of the fountain, she slept again: and though the gold-fish came in a crowd to peep at her, and the oldest frog croaked solemnly, and the birds began to twitter as the shadows grew long, she slept on till they came to look for her; slept, like an enchanted princess waiting for her hero.

But her dreams were not of him, though his letter lay near her heart. She dreamed that day of the dead, not of the living; of her mother, her father; of Grand-Gui and l'Oiselet, her giant and her dwarf, who lay side by side under the ancient yews, in the little churchyard at Montaigle.

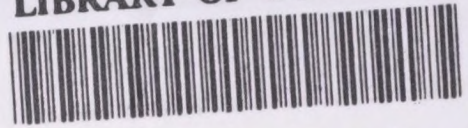
One year! One hundred years! It is pleasant to know that the memory of the good Baron and Baroness, of Monsieur Nico and Madame Renée, saved their great-grandchildren in the upheaval of the Revolution, when half the châteaux in Anjou were consumed by fire or torn down by the hands of furious peasants, and when the last Abbess of Fontevrault, a great-niece of Madame Gabrielle, escaped through the forests to die in a Paris hospital.

Two hundred years! and the wide-spreading forest of Montaigle is almost a legend, and only through a small portion of its old extent does the merry hunt still sweep in winter. Owls nest in the white towers, while in the shelter of

crumbling walls the peasants store their hay. A remote descendant comes and searches in vain, in the old chapel still guarded by a salutary superstition, for any trace of the last Marquis de Montaigle and the heirs of his fine name.

So pass the lordships of this world, their treasures and their glory!

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